FROM PRINT TO SCREEN:
ASIAN AMERICAN ROMANTIC COMEDIES AND SOCIOPOLITICAL INFLUENCES

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Abstract

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In this thesis, I examine how sociopolitical contexts and production cultures have affected how original Asian American narrative texts have been adapted into mainstream romantic comedies. I begin by defining several terms used throughout my thesis: race, ethnicity, Asian American, and humor/comedy. Then, I give a history of Asian American media portrayals, as these earlier images have profoundly affected the ways in which Asian Americans are seen in media today. Finally, I compare the adaptation of humor in two case studies, *Flower Drum Song* (1961) which was created by Rodgers and Hammerstein, and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) which was directed by Jon M. Chu. From this analysis, I argue that both seek to undercut the perpetual foreigner myth, but the difference in sociocultural incentives and control of production have resulted in more nuanced portrayals of some Asian Americans in the latter case. However, its tendency to push towards the mainstream has limited its ability to challenge stereotyped representations, and it continues to privilege an Americentric perspective.

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Introduction

Since the start of the 20th century, Asian and Asian American characters have appeared in United States media. These depictions have reflected national struggles, both internal and external, as the United States sought to define itself and what it means to be American within global contexts. The control of these images has primarily rested in the hands of white directors, writers, and even actors/actresses, and the resulting representations have been dominated by limited, recycled stereotypes. However, in the late 20th-century, Asian American filmmakers took control of their own images through independent film. Today, the foundations they laid are being built upon; the influx of Asian American-led and created film and television in the last 5 years makes *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) appear to be a culminating point in the battle for Asian American representation. Is it a watershed moment though, bringing Asian American characters and storylines out of the margins and into popular consciousness?

In this thesis, I ask how sociopolitical contexts and production cultures have affected the way original Asian American narrative texts have been translated to film, specifically romantic comedies. To answer this question, I examine the screen adaptations of fictional works by writers of Chinese-descent, focusing on how the humor within the original texts has been maintained or altered. I am specifically using humor because it can be wielded to both connect/humanize individuals and further marginalize them. The humor-related choices that are made can therefore reveal in-group (the audience the humor was intended to reach) and out-group decisions, which are tied to social and political motivators. After defining my terms, the first section of my thesis lays out the mechanics of humor which I use to analyze the chosen texts and identifies ways in which humor overlaps with marginality and ethnicity. In this overview, I rely primarily on Dolf

Zillmann's summary of theories of humor, Jerry Farber's theoretical framework of humor, and Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz's anthology, *The Comedy Studies Reader.*

Asian American images in media constantly interact with historical representations, which influence and are influenced by sociopolitical motivations of the times. Therefore, to contextualize my analysis, I introduce Asian American histories and media representations in the second section of my thesis. To do so, I combine Shelley Sang-Hee Lee's history of Asian America with culture and media studies by other scholars. The period covered includes the late 1800s through the Cold War, during which time the dominant media stereotypes included gendered narratives of Orientalism, Yellow Peril, and the Model Minority Myth.

In the final section of my thesis, I analyze two works written by Asian American authors and their adaptations into romantic comedy films. The first is *The Flower Drum Song* (1957) by C. Y. Lee, adapted into a 1958 musical and a 1961 film. The second is *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013) by Kevin Kwan, adapted into a 2018 film. These texts have been selected because there are moments of humor within both versions of the texts and the romantic comedy adaptations feature Asian American casts. In addition, I focus on writers of Chinese-descent to further narrow the scope of the project, since the United States' treatment of Asian and Asian American groups becomes increasingly non-uniform between ethnic groups.

I am specifically using adaptations because there is no single "Asian American experience," and deciding what aspects of a media text are individuated versus stereotyped is challenging without this nonexistent standard. The written works are therefore used as a baseline for "individual experience," and the differential between the original and the media text provides an understanding of the notions of "Asian Americanness" that are at play in media institutions.

These distinctions are not to say that the authors do not participate in stereotyping as well, but the differences between the media and written text reveal the effects of social, political, and economic influences within broader production institutions. Through this process, I identify the notions of "Asian Americanness" that the creators interact with, the effects of being marginalized by sociopolitical structures, and, in the case of *Crazy Rich Asians*, what happens when marginalized creators take control. For each adaptation, I also identify the production processes, sociocultural contexts, and the reception of these works.

Chapter 1: Foundations and Questions

Race, ethnicity, Asian American, comedy, humor: these terms are used widely in everyday conversations but have a variety of meanings and connotations. Therefore, the first four sections of this chapter specify how these terms will be used in the context of this thesis. The first section defines and contextualizes the terms "race" and "ethnicity." These words have precise meanings within the current United States census, but they also have broader sociopolitical implications related to the nation's development and current state. The second section of this chapter gives an overview of how the identifier of "Asian American" originally emerged as a radical term that helped unify various communities in the United States in their political pursuits for civil inclusion and dignities. However, this now-institutionalized umbrella term and the pan-Asian American unification it implies do not necessarily reflect how the individuals lumped in it identify (both at the time of the term's inception and now), and they hide the diversity within Asian American communities and individuals. Next, the third and fourth sections of this chapter deal with comedy and humor. The third section lays out the definitions of comedy and humor, theories about humor mechanics, a framework with which humor can be studied, and the intersection of humor with race and ethnicity. The fourth section then brings in commercial media industries and how profit motivations affect the comedic genre. Once these terms are defined, the fifth and final section of this chapter introduces the questions and methods of this thesis.

1. Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity, two terms often used interchangeably, are recognized by the United States (U.S.) National Institutes of Health (NIH) as socio-political categories which are not biological or anthropological in nature (Schiebinger et al. 2018). Research studies including these

classifications therefore depend on an individual's self-identification (Schiebinger et al. 2018). As of 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau recognizes five racial categories based on "regions of origin" (Table 1, below), in addition to a category for "other race" (United States Census Bureau 2017). Starting from the 2000 census, respondents can select multiple races (United States Census Bureau 2017; Gibson and Jung 2002, 2). The only ethnicities measured by the census are "Hispanic or Latino" or "Not Hispanic or Latino" (United States Census Bureau 2017).

Some complications with race and ethnicity, as with any categorical grouping of human beings, become immediately apparent. First, defining group boundaries tends to falsely homogenize those within the group, overlooking distinctions between subpopulations and individuals (Schiebinger et al. 2018). Second, these categorical boundaries are defied by the existence of multiracial and multiethnic individuals (Schiebinger et al. 2018). Third, these limited categories can fail to reflect an individual's self-identification, as seen by the increase in Hispanic or Latinx census respondents who choose "other race"[1] on the census (Gibson and Jung 2002, 6).

Table 1: Regions of Origin for Race Categories (United States Census Bureau 2017)

White	Black or African American	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
Europe	Africa	North America	Far East	Hawaii
Middle East		South America	Southeast Asia	Guam
North Africa		Central America	Indian	Samoa
				Pacific Islands

[1] In 1970, census respondents who identified as Mexican, Cuban, or Puerto Rican were reclassified as "white" if they chose "other race." In 1980, this reclassification practice was abandoned, and "other race" was accepted (Gibson and Jung 2002, 6).

Despite the arbitrary criteria of racial categorization, its continued influence on social structures stems from its origin as a tool of conquest, oppression, and slavery throughout history (Schiebinger et al. 2018). Initially conceived of as a biological quality, race was used to support the superiority of white groups while justifying the suppression of non-white groups (more on the development of U.S. racial categories in Chapter 2) (Schiebinger et al. 2018; Smedley and Smedley 2005, 19; Rhodes 1993, 185–86). Geneticists now widely consider race to be nonpredictive of genetic differences, yet ideas of biological racial superiority continue to linger, as evidenced by scientific studies in the 1990s and 2000s that, for example, tried to prove that whites and blacks have different brain structures and IQs (Schiebinger et al. 2018; Smedley and Smedley 2005, 16, 19).

Ethnicity was developed as a category not based on biology, but culture, which is considered by anthropologists to be an external, learned quality (Smedley and Smedley 2005, 17). The term "ethnicity" tends to denote a group of people who share common ancestry (of kinship, migration, or colonization) and/or culture (language, religion, customs, beliefs) (Schiebinger et al. 2018). Key to the formation of an ethnic group is a shared consciousness of belonging within that group (J. Lowe 1986, 440). The boundaries of ethnic groups are always being renegotiated, as they depend on both self-designation from within and interactions with outside groups (J. Lowe 1986, 440).

Like racial differences, ethnic differences have been used during times of interethnic conflict (often between neighboring groups with physical similarities) to demonize the enemy group (Smedley and Smedley 2005, 18). The difference between racism and ethnocentric conflict in U.S. history was that ethnic minorities were expected to assimilate, while racial minorities

experienced enforced separation (Smedley and Smedley 2005, 19). Ethnicity was therefore used in U.S. ethnic assimilation narratives from the 1940s onwards to promise a society open to all participants while attempting to sweep histories of racial conflict under the rug (more on ethnic assimilation in Chapter 2) (R. G. Lee 1999).

However, race continues to have pervasive influence on U.S. social structures and ideologies, so race will be referred to more often than ethnicity in this thesis. Certain characteristics pertaining to race have developed in U.S. society, summarized from Audrey and Brian D. Smedley's 2005 publication, "Race as Biology is Fiction, Racism as a Social Problem is Real" (2005) (Smedley and Smedley 2005, 20):

Social Characteristics of Race in North America

1) Races are hierarchically ranked because racial systems are fundamentally unequal.
2) Racial groups are perceived as biologically discrete and exclusive, such that physical characteristics become markers of race[2].
3) Certain cultural behaviors are assumed to be inherited based on race.
4) Following from 2 and 3, physical features and behaviors are innate and inherited.
5) Therefore, differences between races are large and permanent, justifying segregation and anti-miscegenation.
6) Legal and social systems stipulate racial classifications.

As noted previously, the assumptions included above are not scientifically valid (though they have unfortunately shaped scientific research), but the myth of their existence continues to fundamentally contribute to U.S. ideologies. For example, a Pew Research Center report written in 2012, titled *The Rise of Asian Americans*, compares racial groups in both its report and survey questions, using rhetoric that reinforces the notion of a racial hierarchy:

> *"Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated, and fastest-growing racial group in the United States"* (Cohn et al. 2012, 1).

[2] One important caveat is that, despite the use of physical traits as markers for race, the act of racializing individuals does not require specific physical traits to be present (Smedley and Smedley 2005, 22).

> *"About four-in-ten Asian Americans (43%) say Asian Americans are more successful than other racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S."* (Cohn et al. 2012, 16, 85).

That a racial comparison is made in the first quote is unsurprising, and even expected, within a nation in which policy makers rely on race and ethnicity data to aim for equality in education, employment, and health care access (United States Census Bureau 2017). The second quote is stronger evidence of item 1, as it indicates that Pew researchers have asked survey respondents to actively compare themselves to other racial groups using hierarchical wording[3].

The issue of legally codified and enforced racial identities in item 6, though no longer in place, has also had a heavy influence on the current state of U.S. society. For example, the question of reparations and reconciliations for transatlantic slavery, a race-based and legally supported institution in the history of the U.S., continues to be discussed in the 2020 presidential campaigns (Stampler 2019). In addition, though race does not predict genetic differences, it does predict access or barriers to resources and societal inclusion (Smedley and Smedley 2005, 22, 23). Thus, though intentional discrimination has been outlawed, its history of legal permittance has resulted in institutional discrimination[4] and inequalities in areas such as home mortgage lending,

[3] Interestingly, out of the measured racial and ethnic groups, this question was only included in surveys of Asian and Hispanic or Latinx respondents (at least as far as I have been able to uncover) (Cohn et al. 2012, 87). The question, "On the whole, do you think Asian Americans/Hispanics/Latinos have been more successful than other racial and ethnic minority groups in the U.S., less successful, or about equally successful?" was asked in the "2012 National Survey of Latinos" and the "2012 Asian-American Survey" (Cohn et al. 2012, 221, 247, 2013, 107, 120). Perhaps this question was designed for the 2013 Pew Research Center report, *Second-Generation Americans* (written by nearly the same group of authors as the 2012 report on Asian Americans), which focused on Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans because these two groups make up the majority of U.S. first and second generation immigrants (Cohn et al. 2013, 7).

[4] Institutional discrimination is defined by Smedley and Smedley as "the uneven access by group membership to resources, status, and power that stems from facially neutral policies and practices of organizations and institutions" (Smedley and Smedley 2005, 22)

residential segregation, employment and housing practices, and health care (Smedley and Smedley 2005, 22).

Because U.S. institutions like the NIH and Census Bureau now recognize that race, unmoored from biology, is a social construct, another characteristic fundamental to the current racial ideology of the United States becomes apparent. As evidenced by Table 1, current institutionalized race classification depends almost exclusively on self-identified "regions of origin." Related is the common rhetoric that the U.S. is "a nation of immigrants"—a phrase popularized by J. F. Kennedy's book with the same title—which reminds nationals who do not identify with the "American Indian or Alaska Native" race category that they have extraterritorial "origins" (Jordan 2018). This emphasis on origins is not just at the state-level: the popularity of genetic ancestry testing also verify that individuals, unsurprisingly, have an interest in their own origins (Bessone 2017, 616). Furthermore, an individual's origin-based identification can supersede their race-based identification. First-generation immigrants especially tend to identify based on their country of origin instead of using pan-racial or pan-ethnic terms[5] (Cohn et al. 2013, 47–48). This national and independent focus on "origins," no matter if they are recent or distant, thus tie notions of race to individual histories.

[5] The 2013 Pew Research Center report, *Second-Generation Americans*, summarizes responses to a survey question which asked whether the respondents described themselves most often using "[Country of Origin]," a pan-racial/pan-ethnic term ("Latino/Hispanic" or "Asian" or "Asian American"), or "American" (Cohn et al. 2013, 120). First-generation Hispanic/Latinx and Asian American respondents overwhelmingly identified by their country of origin (61% for Hispanic/Latinx and 69% for Asian). These numbers dropped for second-generation Americans (38% for Hispanic/Latinx and 45% for Asian), replaced with an increase in respondents who identified as "American" (Cohn et al. 2013, 47–48). "First-generation" refers to people born outside of the U.S. and U.S. territories to non-U.S. citizen parents (Cohn et al. 2013, 4). "Second-generation" refers to people born in the U.S. or U.S. territories to at least one "first-generation" parent (Cohn et al. 2013, 4). The report does not discuss other racial/ethnic group responses to this question (see footnote 3).

This more recently institutionalized "regions of origin" and self-identification-focused concept of race therefore places it closer to ethnicity. However, completely embracing this ideology of race in isolation would be a mistake. Though seemingly well-intentioned in its correction of the previous biological basis of race, this definition is misleading. Similar to how ethnicity theory was used to suppress racial tensions, this sterilized definition of race diverts attention away from the social and economic stratification of the U.S. (Nguyen 1998, 629). "Race is not a matter of individual choice, but an enduring feature of social differentiation encouraged by the law and by a stratified economy," author Viet Thanh Nguyen argues in his review of Lisa Lowe's book, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Nguyen 1998, 630). Therefore, though this thesis will be relying on the contemporary "regions of origin" definition of "race" for clarity and consistency with other scholarly works, the term still carries the weight of its history in and effect on U.S. society, its previously listed social characteristics, and the reality that race is frequently imposed on individuals regardless of their self-identification.

2. Forming Asian America

The term "Asian American" was coined during the 1960s, a period shaped by grassroots movements amongst minority groups (including African Americans, Latinxs, women, and homosexuals), students, and anti-war activists (Nguyen 1998, 632; S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 291). At this time, the term signified a radical pan-Asian politicization and mobilization against racism, imperialism, and class oppression, driven by desires to dismantle their foreignization and assert their belonging in America[6] (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 291–92). These Asian American activists were

[6] Earlier examples of Asian American activism exist, but it hadn't previously been self-organized under the shared identification of "Asian American" (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 292).

heavily influenced and inspired by black political activism, and Asian-black solidarities developed through their collaboration and mutual understandings (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 292–94, 297).

Asian American activism and consciousness emerged in several ways during the 1960s and 1970s. Some Asian American activists rejected stereotypes of passivity inherent in assimilation and "model minority" narratives (discussed further in Chapter 2), while others wanted justice for wrongs committed against their communities (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 292). Asian American critiques against the Vietnam War centered around its racist and imperialist dimensions (compared to the critiques against violence offered by mainstream anti-war movements), and many Asian American anti-war activists saw in the peoples oppressed by colonialism abroad a reflection of their domestic position as racial minorities (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 294–96). In California, the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) developed as a coalition organization that brought together black, Latinx, Asian American, and Native American student activists (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 301). The organization began a strike on November 6, 1968 to demand the addition of ethnic studies to universities (which would teach the backgrounds and histories of minority groups, undistorted by mainstream academia), challenge institutional racism, and advocate for minority access to higher education (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 303–4). As a consequence of their activism, the first School of Ethnic Studies was established in the U.S. (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 306).

Other issues that Asian American activists rallied around included the Japanese American redress campaign and the anti-eviction movement at the International Hotel (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 306–12). Simultaneously, Asian Americans were recovering their histories and engaging in cultural production such as writing, making music, creating and performing in plays, and

generating art (visual, theatrical, and film) (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 298–99). Filmmaker Renee Tajima-Peña believes that the first stage of Asian American independent filmmaking that emerged during this period was a form of activism and thus reflected the political motivations of these communities (Tajima 1991, 14–16).

This first Asian American movement was not immune to marginalizing its own minorities, though. Gender politics and women's input were largely disregarded by the men of the movement, and as a result, women formed their own organizations (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 300). Homosexuality, too, was ignored. Gay activists found themselves isolated by both the Asian American movement and the gay rights movement (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 300). Therefore, they sought out and created their own groups at the intersection of these two communities (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 300). At the same time (and after) this period of Asian American activism, legal changes in immigration law (starting in 1965) brought an influx of immigrants from Asia that substantially changed the demographics of Asian America (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 317). Most of these immigrants came with families, and about one-third were educated and skilled professionals[7] (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 318). The success of some of these immigrants dominated media representations, which exacerbated the model minority stereotype, and preexisting Asian American activist groups and communities experienced challenges in incorporating these more recent immigrants into their communities and movements (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 312, 329, 336).

[7] Entry to the U.S. privileges those who come from higher socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 318–21, 330). However, there were also many Asian immigrants who were refugees, undocumented, or sponsored by families, and the Asian immigrant population remained socioeconomically diverse (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 318, 321–22, 330). Thus, the Asian American population both increased in the number of upper class professionals and lower class working poor (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 331).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the movement was reawakened. In 1982, two white men who blamed their unemployment on the Japanese, killed Vincent Chin (a Chinese American), bringing anti-Asian, racialized violence into public view (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 338–39). These anti-Japanese sentiments (driven by economic competition between the U.S. and Japan) were accompanied by the racialized scrutiny of Korean American and Chinese American individuals like Suzi Thompson and Wen-Ho Lee (driven by suspicions of Korean and Chinese influence on U.S. politics and national defense) (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 340–42). Under these circumstances, which upended the myth of a "postracial America," many Asian Americans were forced to recognize their continued racial vulnerability (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 342). They unified to advocate for stronger legislation against hate crimes (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 342). Tajima-Peña argues that both the Asian American movement and cinematography became more institutionalized during this period, the latter developing a more technical and market focus as it aimed towards mainstream appeal (Tajima 1991, 22–23).

Asian America, however, is not one community with a single mindset. Some Filipino American activists have even advocated for the separation of "Filipino" from the "Asian" category in the census (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 347). In addition, Viet Than Nguyen argues that the Asian American coalition has become more politically diverse and, in some factions, even contrary to its initial radical motivations in the '60s (Nguyen 1998, 632). It now includes the Asian American neoconservative, who has reconciled racial self-identity with free-market economics, and the Asian American liberal, who uses political activism to strive towards the middle class and upward mobility (Nguyen 1998, 632–33). Both figures have accepted the exploitative structures of

capitalism and liberal representative democracy[8], which Lisa Lowe has argued were the original incentives behind the 1960s radical dissent (Nguyen 1998, 632). Issues like affirmative action, too, continue to be divisive (discussed further in Chapter 2) (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 342–43).

For consistency with the "regions of origin" definition of "race" used in this thesis, when the term "Asian American" (and "[Country of Origin] American") is used in this thesis, it refers to people who have either themselves immigrated from those areas or have an ancestor who has immigrated from those areas. However, this terminology comes with an important caveat that the individuals may not always identify with these terms themselves[9] (see footnote 5), as well as the recognition that these labels, chosen because of their scholastic and governmental acceptance, also contribute to the racialization and false homogenization of these individuals.

3. Comedy, Humor, and Racial or Ethnic Marginality

Comedy, as media scholar Dolf Zillmann explains, is a form of drama that centers around conflict and resolution plots (Zillmann 2000, 35). However, it differs from the dramatic genre because it requires a "comic frame of mind": the audience must relax empathetic restraints and serious mindsets in order to be receptive to the format's lighthearted attitude towards its topics (Zillmann 2000, 39). The term "humor" is harder to capture because it is frequently used to mean several different things: a stimulus that elicits or is intended to elicit laughter or amusement (e.g., a joke), the act of creating that stimulus (e.g., telling a joke), the psychological state of

[8] According to Lisa Lowe, capitalism enforces a hegemony by allowing dominant groups to prosper while generating labor exploitation, class divisions, forced migration, and cultural displacement of nondominant groups (Nguyen 1998, 628, 634). The liberal democracy promises rights, citizenship, and political representation but instead suppresses dissent while perpetuating exclusion (Nguyen 1998, 628, 631).

[9] This thesis attempts to use the same terms as those chosen by identified individuals, but often relies on descriptions from other parties.

amusement (e.g., response to the joke), and a characteristic tendency to laugh or tell jokes (e.g. "sense of humor") (Warren, Barsky, and Mcgraw 2018, 530). In this thesis, the first definition of humor is being used, which Warren et al. even relabel as "comedy" (Warren, Barsky, and Mcgraw 2018, 530).

Zillman argues that any such humorous expression, whatever its format and length, can be analyzed as a miniature comedic plot, since it must express some commentary on a set of circumstances within some kind of conflict-resolution framework (Zillmann 2000, 39–40). Therefore, though the term "humor" will generally be used to refer to a quality of situations and materials which may induce laughter and amusement, and "comedy" will generally refer to the genre that does the same, the words will also be used somewhat interchangeably in this thesis. Although there is no single theory which explains what makes for successful humor (funny, popular, or profitable), there are many theories of how audiences understand humor (discussed in this section), and how producers have used it to generate profit (discussed in the next section) (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 1).

The "superiority theory" of humor, credited to philosopher Thomas Hobbes, depends on the audiences' judgement of the characters within the mini-plot (Zillmann 2000, 37, 40). For a drama to be enjoyed, well-liked characters who may begin as victims should benefit by the end, while disliked characters should experience misfortune (Zillmann 2000, 35–36). However, the latter situation tends to have more comedic value, and thus, disparagement of disliked characters, especially by the liked characters, becomes common in comedy (Zillmann 2000, 37). As Hobbes theorized, laughing at someone else's misfortune places audience members above the victim of humiliation, which gives them feelings of superiority and strengthens their ego and self-

confidence (Zillmann 2000, 40–41). Similar results emerge when seeing undeservedly successful characters fail, suggesting that it is not always a sense of superiority that evokes enjoyment, but perhaps a sense of justice and restored fairness (Zillmann 2000, 42).

William McDougall clarifies that laughter at the misfortune of others is the release of empathetic distress; that is, assuming that humans naturally wish to empathize, when we dislike the victim and refuse to identify with them, our pent-up empathy at the situation is instead converted into laughter (Zillmann 2000, 41–42). Not all disparagement evokes laughter: if the recipient is not in a comic frame of mind or does in fact empathize or align with the object of derision, laughter fails to emerge (Zillmann 2000, 38, 41). In addition, there are many situations in which we find humor that have nothing to do with ridiculing others. Thus, the superiority theory can only account for the success of humor under certain circumstances, and other theories of humor are required.

By contrast, the "incongruity theory" of humor postulates that relief generates laughter (Zillmann 2000, 43). A problem is introduced to audience members that builds up apprehension or some other strained expectation, but the problem is suddenly resolved in an unexpected way; in other words, the audience realizes that their initial understanding of an ambiguous situation was incorrect (Zillmann 2000, 43, 44). The remaining nervous energy, now lacking a purpose, is then released as laughter (Zillmann 2000, 43). The problem can be as large as impending physical danger (rustling bushes that prove to be a harmless rabbit), or as small as incompatible contexts (Zillmann gives the example: "'Doctor, doctor. I broke my arm in three places.' 'Well, stay away from them in the future.'") (Zillmann 2000, 43). Following the "conflict-resolution" framework of humor, the resolution is found in the recognition of the ambiguity (Zillmann 2000, 44). When this

process requires some mental work on the part of the audience (for example, in ironic humor), the sense of achievement and inclusion from "getting the joke" (and the exclusionist possibility that others might have "missed the point") adds to the amused reaction (Zillmann 2000, 44; Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 102–3). Again, not all instances of incongruity result in laughter.

English-literature scholar Jerry Farber[10] expands on ideas from incongruity theory to develop a more robust framework for studying humor (Farber 2007, 67–68, 72). He suggests that humorous situations are made up of two incongruous elements which serve specific roles: element *A* represents the social norm or more acceptable idea, and element *B* is linked[11] to *A* in such a way as to undermine that norm (Farber 2007, 69). Then, the move from *A* to *B* in the set-up evokes some gratifying shift in the internal state of the perceiver: from state *[a]*, the internalized constraint, to an opposing state *[b]*, some strong inclination (Farber 2007, 69). He retains the idea of a "comic frame of mind" with his concept of "play": a mode which allows people to briefly suspend realistic assessments so that the *[b]* can ascend over *[a]* (Farber 2007, 69). However, he stipulates that for the situation to be funny, *A* is not fully eliminated, but rather remains in place in some way to continue evoking the restrictive norm (Farber 2007, 70–71). The *A* and *B* are not always both explicitly given, and thus, individuals' variable ability to "read in" these elements, based on their individual *[a]* and *[b]* states, contribute to their differing levels of amusement in their responses (Farber 2007, 73–76).

Farber explores several different kinds of humor using this framework: derisive humor (which incorporates ideas from superiority theory), empathetic humor, and counter-restriction

[10] Interestingly, there is also a comedian named Jerry Farber.
[11] Farber uses "link" to connect *B* to *A* instead of "resolution" to make his framework more inclusive and therefore broadly applicable (Farber 2007, 68).

humor (which includes aggressive, sexual, and nonsense humor). In derisive humor, *[a]* is the sense of others' superiority developed through social interactions and experiencing personal failures, and *[b]* is a personal need for superiority (Farber 2007, 73). The *A* in these cases is established as someone superior (or even just "normal") who is then reduced to *B* so that the perceiver's inferiority is denied and displaced onto the other (Farber 2007, 73–77). In empathetic humor, the *[a]* remains the same as before, but the *[b]* becomes a desire to be included (Farber 2007, 77). The *B* then becomes a reduction of *A* that the perceiver is willing to identify with, giving audiences a sense of relief that their failures are shared (Farber 2007, 77). In counter-restriction humor, the *A* is some internalized restriction, and the *B* is the inclination being restricted, whether it be a desire to act with aggression, break sexual taboos, or evade rational thought (Farber 2007, 78–84). These modes of humor are not mutually exclusive; for example, someone can experience both empathetic and derisive humor when they find that their struggles are shared by others who are in even worse situations (Farber 2007, 77).

Under Farber's framework, humor naturally reveals incongruities, thus allowing it to become a vehicle for social criticism and to expose inconsistencies within our understandings of the world (Farber 2007, 84). Farber is careful to stipulate that, while humor *can* criticize society, not all humor *does* (Farber 2007, 84). In addition, humor naturally creates boundaries between groups—those who the joke is "for" and those who the joke excludes—and it therefore contributes to group identification and solidarity (J. Lowe 1986, 440; Gilbert 2004, 14). Thus,

when a humorous expression deals with race or ethnicity (which hereafter will be referred to as "ethnic humor," for short), several different, and sometimes overlapping, results may emerge[12].

First, ethnic humor can be used to put down marginalized groups—people who live within America but are denied full social, cultural, political, or economic inclusion and thus have less power and control (Gilbert 2004, 4, 5). This type of humor largely falls under Farber's category of derisive humor. Social historian Joseph Boskin explains that within the United States, ethnic humor originated to maintain the dominant groups' power, and it expressed their feelings of social class superiority and hostility against marginalized immigrants and races (Boskin and Dorinson 1985, 81; J. Lowe 1986, 442). Marginalized individuals have also adopted these stereotypes and wielded them against both other marginalized groups and themselves ("self-deprecating" humor) (J. Lowe 1986, 439). This self-deprecating humor, author and comedienne Joanne Gilbert postulates, might in some cases arise from the individual's desire to be accepted by the dominant culture: joking about themselves "proves" that they also have a sense of humor (Gilbert 2004, 20). Group identification is useful in understanding how such disparaging jokes are received by audiences. Researchers have found that the ethnicities of the victor and victim in a joke are correlated with how funny research participants find that joke (Zillmann 2000, 38). If the participants are more positively disposed towards the victor than the victim, they tend to find the joke funnier than if they are more positively disposed towards the victim (Zillmann 2000, 38).

Second, ethnic humor, including self-deprecating humor, can be used subversively by the racially and ethnically marginalized as an act of socially-acceptable aggression that challenges

[12] There are other results that ethnic humor can produce not listed here, and humor created by racially or ethnically marginalized individuals is certainly not limited to racial or ethnic humor.

oppression (J. Lowe 1986, 448; Gilbert 2004, 10, 14). The marginalized status gives some of these individuals an "outsider's" perspective which separates them from dominant discourses and positions them advantageously to criticize mainstream assumptions and structures (J. Lowe 1986, 448; Gilbert 2004, xiii, 5, 18). The humorous context—the play mindset—then allows the criticism to emerge in a more palatable and nonthreatening guise, as "just" a joke (Gilbert 2004, 10). Gilbert considers the commodification of such performances to also be an act of subversion: the dominant culture literally pays to see the social disparity being challenged (Gilbert 2004, xi). However, she was referring specifically to standup comedy, and the economics of other forms of humor are not as straightforward.

Third, ethnic humor can bring groups together by facilitating communication and mediating conflict (J. Lowe 1986, 442). In these cases, common human failures can become a bridge between cultures, an example of Farber's category of empathetic humor (J. Lowe 1986, 442). Fourth, ethnic humor can affirm ethnic pride (Boskin and Dorinson 1985, 82). Third(plus)-generation Americans who may be further removed from their heritage cultures can use ethnic humor and other such markers as a way to maintain a connection to their ethnic identity and express their "insider" status within an ethnic group, called "symbolic ethnicity" by Herbert Gans[13] (J. Lowe 1986, 453). English-literature scholar John Lowe suggests that ethnicity may be increasingly used as a means of self-expression in people's lives (J. Lowe 1986, 453). Gilbert, too, has suggested that, as America has shifted from assimilation to cultural pluralism narratives, self-

[13] However, Greek Studies scholar Yiorgos Anagnostou also critiques "symbolic ethnicity," which is a concept of (primarily white) ethnicity as a "situational deployment of 'easily expressed and felt' cultural symbols" (Anagnostou 2009, 95). Symbolic ethnicity offers whites the ability to choose their identities while denying biracial and racially marginalized individuals the same freedom (Anagnostou 2009, 107).

deprecation within ethnic humor has become less common (Gilbert 2004, 19). She notes that a decrease in the pressure to internalize "WASP"[14] values and a raised sensitivity to the damaging effects of stereotyping has restricted the "license" to make disparaging jokes about a racially or ethnically marginalized group to members of that group (Gilbert 2004, 19). Again, some, all, or none of these four readings of ethnic humor—marginalization, subversion, cross-cultural unification, and ethnic pride—may apply to an audience member's reception of a race or ethnicity-based humorous expression.

Although superiority theory, incongruity theory, and Farber's expansion on the latter offer a wide variety of ways to interpret and analyze the effects of humor, Sigmund Freud argues that people themselves do not know what actually makes them laugh (Zillmann 2000, 45). Instead, he proposes that people laugh hardest at socially unacceptable, tendentious humor (which Zillmann connects to superiority theory humor), but this laughter feels permissible because they have wrongly ascribed their amusement to the innocuous elements of the comedic plot (related to incongruity theory humor) (Zillmann 2000, 44–45). Together, these three theories, superiority theory, incongruity theory, and misattribution theory have been able to predict what elements will make a set-up—on average—more or less humorous in experimental tests (Zillmann 2000). Of course, none of them can predict whether an *individual* will find something funny. Therefore, while this thesis will use these theories and frameworks to offer potential readings of comedic and humorous texts, its focus will be on the contexts which inform the texts' production, discussed next.

[14] White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

4. Comedy, Commercial Media Industries, and Race

Because one humorous moment can amuse people in a variety of ways, comedic media can potentially reach wide audiences (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 6). Comedy's popularity attests to this reach: around 1990, comedy made up 40% of the top 100 film rentals and 46% of the top 100 television shows, taking by far the biggest share of any genre[15] (Zillmann 2000, 46). This broad appeal, in addition to the lower cost of production for comedy compared to action, makes comedy an attractive genre for media producers to experiment with during times of transition or uncertainty in the media industry (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 6). For example, the most popular early films were comedies, the move from radio to television was facilitated by sitcoms, the early internet was formed around short comedies like viral videos, and the current television industry has borrowed comedy forms from internet culture to stay relevant in the post-network era (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 7–8).

Despite comedy's broad appeal to audiences and producers alike, the reception of specific comedic moments is dependent on individual experiences. That is, if a comedic bit is to amuse, the rules or norms that it plays with (the *A* in Farber's framework) must already be familiar to the perceivers, obtained through their interactions with society[16]. Therefore, comedy producers must negotiate between the broad (a sense of "shared" human experience which gives comedy

[15] A more recent survey shows that as of November 2018, comedy television shows are considered very or somewhat favorable by 88% of U.S. respondents (the highest percent attained by the represented genres, closely followed by action/adventure at 87%) (Statista 2018). In North America from 1995 to 2019, comedy was ranked fourth in most popular movie genres, based on global box office revenue (preceded by adventure, action, and drama) (Statista 2019b).

[16] The rules or norms in comedy are implied by the external contexts in which the humorous expression is formed, but spelling out these rules can destroy the humorous effect (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 29). As a result, comedy is generally less universal than genres like tragedy, in which the rules being confronted are explicitly outlined (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 30).

wide appeal) and the specific (the cultural, economic, and political contexts that shape the individual's experience of comedy) (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 171).

When race or ethnicity-based identity politics meets comedy, this negotiation can produce contradictory results. While a comedy producer might intend to critique racial hegemonies through subversion (introduced in the previous section), they may also seek mainstream appeal, and thus the humor that delivers the critique becomes ambivalent (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 172). On the level of individual audience members, some may read the humor as criticizing dominant structures, while others may instead read the humor in a way that perpetuates the structures it was intended to dismantle (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 171).

In the case of racial stereotyping in comedy, some critical scholars suggest that the latter consequence (normalizing racialized differences and hierarchies) predominates (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 185, 186). For example, the "buddy-cop" movie *Rush Hour 2* (2001) disrupts convention by casting an African American man and an Asian man as the leads, yet it also includes blatant racial stereotypes (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 184). Like genre conventions (e.g. the "meet cute" in romantic comedies), stereotyping allows media producers to quickly convey information about situations and characters that are widely intelligible, thus instilling expectations in the audience which can then be manipulated for comic effect (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 135, 184–85, 197).

In a study by Park et al. (2006), a majority of white, black, and Asian focus group respondents perceived the racial stereotypes and jokes in the movie as permissible because of the context (without which, respondents acknowledged, the jokes would be offensive) (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 188–89). First, the film is a comedy, and racial stereotypes should therefore

not be taken seriously; second, racial minorities were making the racial jokes[17]; third, racial jokes were directed at white, black, and Asian groups[18]; and fourth, the two main characters making most of the jokes, Carter and Lee, are close friends who aren't offended themselves, relegating the jokes to mere banter (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 189–91). Despite their insistence that the racial stereotypes should not be taken seriously, most respondents indicated that they believed the stereotypes were based on truth (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 192). Therefore, comedy which disarms viewers with "harmless" humor can subtly perpetuate stereotypes that influence or validate racialized worldviews (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 193–94).

In summary, studying humor provides insights into contemporary American power relations (Gilbert 2004, xvii). Specifically, because individual identity and perspectives strongly affect how comedy is performed and processed, comedy is not equally funny to everyone (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 209). Therefore, as Marx and Sienkiewicz state, "the American entertainment industries must consciously decide who gets to make comedy and which audiences they will target" (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 209).

5. Thesis Questions

The sociopolitical place of Asian Americans in the United States has both produced and is a product of racialized media depictions (see Chapter 2). Media producers can choose to use humor to empower or oppress the racially marginalized, since humor can both serve as a bridge of common humanity between racial groups or contribute to the normalization of stereotyped

[17] Respondents suggest that white people making the jokes would have been viewed as perpetrators of racism (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 190).

[18] Though the researchers found that racial jokes directed at whites occur far less frequently, their limited presence gave the impression that all races are targeted (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 190–91).

racial differences. Humor is therefore an informative lens through which to examine Asian American representations.

This thesis asks how sociopolitical contexts and production culture have influenced the humor within films which feature Asian and Asian American casts. Specifically, the thesis uses *The Flower Drum Song* (1957 book by C. Y. Lee and 1961 film adaptation by Ross Hunter) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013 book by Kevin Kwan and 2018 film adaptation by Jon M. Chu) as case studies. These films, both romantic comedies, are analyzed through Jerry Farber's framework by offering potential readings of selected moments of humor, based on superiority theory, incongruity theory, and misattribution theory. These moments are also compared to their counterparts in the books, if such counterparts exist. Both films are contextualized by industry trends, generic conventions, and United States sociopolitical currents. In addition, the production decisions and reception of these works are discussed.

Chapter 2: Asian American Histories and Media Representations

Asian American images in media today do not emerge in isolation. Instead, they constantly recycle, reference, and react to historical representations. Embedded in this history are the political and social motivations of an emerging and developing nation: The United States of America (U.S.). As the country attempted to define itself and what it means to be American throughout the decades, it has frequently marginalized racial minorities through both policy and representation. However, these racial minorities will soon make up a majority of the U.S., and the increasing number of multiracial individuals has even brought the meaning and relevance of "race" into question (Takaki 1998, 504; Tavernise 2018). As minority and multiracial groups gain voices and power, and film and television markets become increasingly global, the untenable and narrow stereotypes within media conventions are increasingly challenged, to some degree of influence on media institutions and ideologies. Therefore, in order to answer the questions of this thesis, first, historical film and television representations of Asians and Asian Americans must be understood.

This chapter aims to give a broad overview of Asian American histories, their images in Hollywood, and the sociopolitical motivations which influenced both. The first section describes how Asian Americans have played a fundamental role in the economic and racial development of the United States, discussing first the entry of Asians into the U.S. on economic terms, and second, some examples of how Asian Americans are entangled in the nation's understanding of race. The next section expands on the latter point, with an overview of how anti-Asian sentiments, stemming in part from a tradition of Orientalism, have contributed to concepts of "whiteness" in the U.S. and formulated media depictions of Asians as menacing threats. Anti-Asian sentiments

also generated anti-Asian miscegenation laws and related "yellow face" and whitewashing practices within Hollywood, discussed in the third section. The remaining parts of this chapter cover the shift in the national formulation during the post-World War II/Cold War era, at which time the U.S. tried to position itself as a champion for racial tolerance and capitalism, giving rise to Asian femininity and model minority stereotypes (sections four and five, respectively).

1. Asian American Histories as United States History

Asians have been living in North America since before the country was even founded, with the first recorded Filipino settlement in 1763 New Orleans (Galang 2003, 162). The first large wave of Asian immigration to the U.S. came in the mid-19th century, following the first Opium War in China (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 29–31). Push factors such as economic decline and civil conflict in southern China, coupled with pull factors like the California Gold Rush and other commercial or labor opportunities, drove an unprecedented number of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 29–31). The poorer portion of these immigrants were indentured laborers, who were envisioned as partial substitutes for black slave labor once the African slave trade was abolished (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 32). Shortly thereafter came immigrants from Japan, Korea, India, the Philippines, and most recently, Southeast Asia, all under different circumstances (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 38–57, 273–83).

The complex ways in which Asian Americans were required for the economic development of the U.S., but were deprived of political citizenship and excluded from the national culture prior to World War II (WWII) (discussed further in the next section), has continued to influence the position of Asian Americans in U.S. society in the 21st century (L. Lowe 1998, 42). For example, immigration restrictions, disenfranchisement, and exclusion from

domestic life limited the growth of pre-WWII Asian American populations, so after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act lifted national origin-based immigration quotas, immigrants from Asia outnumbered existing Asian American populations and the majority of Asian Americans are now foreign-born, though the percentage varies by age, state, and nation of origin (L. Lowe 1998, 44; López, Ruiz, and Patten 2017; S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 317). This and other effects of exploitation and marginalization require that studies of Asian America be interdisciplinary, combining and challenging traditional disciplines of history, literature, arts, and social science, and defying clear divisions between economic, political, and cultural motivations (L. Lowe 1998, 42). What emerges from these studies is not just a picture of Asian America, but a revised understanding of the United States itself. Lisa Lowe writes: "The history of Asian American formation highlights the production of *race*… and it rewrites the history of the United States *as* a complex racial history" (L. Lowe 1998, 42).

Despite media tendencies to frame racial politics as Black-and-White issues, Asian America does not exist in the margins of these politics (Beltrán and Fojas 2008, 3). Instead, tensions in both white and non-white America (including intra-minority tensions) have drawn Asian American communities into the conversation, both through active participation and by being involuntarily blamed or weaponized. This theme of complex interracial interaction is demonstrated in Ronald Takaki's review of three developments which occurred in the 1990s.

The first event was the 1992 Los Angeles Riot/Uprising. That year, four white police officers who had brutally beaten a black man, Rodney King, were deemed not-guilty in court (Takaki 1998, 493). The outrage that followed led to the razing of the Koreatown near South Central Los Angeles by the local black and Latinx communities (Takaki 1998, 493–94; S. S.-H. Lee

2014, 346). Governmental neglect of and cultural misunderstandings between the black and the Korean communities played a central role in the uprising and resulting devastation (Takaki 1998, 494–96). The black community, left to face inner-city poverty caused by deindustrialization and white flight, was desperate, frustrated, and angry with class divisions that they believed Koreans stood on the opposite side of, resulting in the murders of several Korean shop owners (Takaki 1998, 495–96; S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 344–45).

Also excluded from white society, Koreans and their businesses were not protected by the local police during the looting (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 346). The Korean community had found that serving the otherwise underserved black and Latinx neighborhoods was a niche business model with low cultural and financial barriers-to-entry (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 344). However, many also believed the media stereotypes which depicted blacks as violent and lazy criminals, leading to the shooting of a black girl, Latasha Harlins, by Korean shopkeeper Soon Ja Du, whose subsequent lack of jailtime angered the black community (Takaki 1998, 494). The racial tensions that fueled the uprising therefore reflected complex multiracial dynamics between blacks, whites, and Asians. It also brought into question the role of intra-Asian allegiances and Asian American identities: were the riots a Korean American issue alone, or an Asian American issue (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 347)?

The second development was the weaponizing of Asian American university admissions against affirmative action policies. In the mid-1980s, researchers found that Asian American admission rates to various universities around the nation had been dropping—due to discriminatory policy changes, in the case of The University of California at Berkeley—and conservatives quickly picked up the issue in service of dismantling affirmative action policies (Takaki 1998, 498–99). These politicians claimed that affirmative action was “reverse

discrimination" against Asian Americans, unfairly benefitting black and Latinx applicants and undermining the "meritocracy" of America (Takaki 1998, 498–99).

In California, the fight culminated in the 1996 ballot that included Proposition 209, which would effectively abolish affirmative action (Takaki 1998, 500). Republican Party support of the proposition relied on using the Asian American angle to hide from accusations of racism (Takaki 1998, 500). However, not all of these supposed beneficiaries bought into the rhetoric: a majority of Asian American votes (61%) were against the proposition[19] (Takaki 1998, 501). Through the educational efforts of Asian American civil rights organizations, many Asian Americans had recognized that they too benefitted from affirmative action, and many understood the need to provide interracial support to the fight against discrimination (Takaki 1998, 501–2).

In recent months (October 2018), a new trial has appeared in a federal district court. The case brought by Students for Fair Admissions claims that Harvard discriminates against Asian Americans in admissions (Hartocollis 2018). It remains to be seen whether the case will advance to the Supreme Court, and if so, what the implications will be for using race as a factor in admissions processes. Once again, Asian Americans are being pitted against other minority groups while acting as a shield against charges of racism for those who wish to dismantle affirmative action[20].

Finally, Takaki's third development is of the increasingly multicultural and multiracial Asian America. Not only has the concept of Asian American identities emerged, transcending

[19] The proposition did end up passing 54% to 46% (Takaki 1998, 501).

[20] The plaintiff is led by white conservative American Edward Blum, who had previously lost another Supreme Court case against affirmative action: *Fisher v The University of Texas* (Hartocollis 2018). Blum has stated that he specifically "needed Asian plaintiffs" for his Harvard case (Hinger 2018).

national origins, but identities are also spreading beyond Asian cultural heritage through mixed-race families and artistic expression which draws from a multitude of cultural inspirations (Takaki 1998, 502–8). In fact, the fastest growing portion of Asian America has been the mixed-race population, who were finally allowed to recognize their multiracial background on the 2000 Census (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 347). Their increasingly visible presence asks whether traditional racial categories are still relevant (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 348). Some claim that we are moving towards a post-racial society, while others consider racial transcendence a utopian fantasy (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 348).

2. Chinese Exclusion Act and Orientalism

Almost as soon as the nation was founded, the privilege of United States citizenship has been tied to whiteness. This requirement was turned into legal code by the Naturalization Act of 1790, which stated that only a "free white person" was eligible for naturalization (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 122). Even post-Civil War, changes to naturalization law which made "persons of African descent" eligible still excluded those of Asian descent (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 123). This bar was made explicit in 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act, creating the first federal law which determined who could and could not immigrate to the United States[21] (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 123).

However, the status of non-Chinese Asians remained uncertain, and throughout the early 20th century, several naturalization court cases such as Ozawa v. United States (1922) and United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923) centered around the vagueness of the term "white"[22] (S. S.-

[21] And thereby creating the first "illegal" immigrants.
[22] Questions included: Does "white" refer to light skin color? Does it include the "ethnographically Caucasian" Asian Indians?

H. Lee 2014, 123–24). The decisions in these cases proved that those with governmental power wanted to exclude immigrants who were not of Caucasian European descent[23]. By the 1930s, all Asian nationals had been barred from immigration whether through law or court cases, except for Filipinos[24], who were still made aliens under the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act and given a meager 50-person immigration quota per year (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 123–25). Not until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (also called the McCarran-Walter Act) were the last of the anti-Asian, race-based eligibility restrictions abolished (Galang 2003, 164).

Lisa Lowe explains that prior to World War II, these anti-Asian immigration and naturalization restrictions helped resolve the nation's tensions between its economic need for cheap labor and its political need to imagine a homogenous, culturally-unified nation (L. Lowe 1998, 31). With the status of these "nonwhite" Asians codified, the United States could maximize its profits by recruiting Asian labor, while preventing labor oversupply and ensuring that these disenfranchised groups could not accumulate capital or access the political sphere, effectively distancing them from the conception of national culture (L. Lowe 1998, 31).

This institutionalized division was both a symptom of and generator for anti-Asian nativism. Shelley Sang-Hee Lee argues that the anti-Asian sentiment from the late 1800s to early 1900s was driven by social and economic anxieties of the time, especially the Long Depression, which started in 1873 (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 144–45). Politicians, faced with high unemployment, discontent, and labor uprisings, promoted immigration restriction as the solution to the

[23] The construction of the "white" vs "nonwhite" dichotomy both consolidated European descendants as "white" and based the formation of Asian American "race" on legal definitions rooted in national origins (L. Lowe 1998, 31). Yet, as noted in Chapter 1, biology became closely tied to understandings of that race.
[24] The Philippines were annexed by the United States in 1898, and Filipinos were considered U.S. nationals until 1934 (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 125).

depression, specifically targeting the Chinese (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 145). At the forefront of anti-Chinese movements were other marginalized groups: working men, European immigrants, and white women (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 144–46). These individuals found a sense of identity, solidarity, and empowerment through the xenophobic identification of a common "enemy" (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 144–46).

Anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. did not start nor end with the Long Depression. It had its roots in Orientalism, a European imagination of the "East" (read: the unknown) which developed in conjunction with Europe's ideas of itself, as Edward Said theorized (Hsing and Xing 1998, 164–65). The "Orient" was thus created as a mysterious and threatening place, inferior to the Occident, and perpetually backwards and feminized (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 6–8). Inherent in this process was the production of difference and the "othering" of the Orient and its people (Hsing and Xing 1998, 64).

In the United States, Orientalism began as an appreciation for the distant, "exotic" lands of China and India, where luxury goods were produced, with whom profitable trade relations might be developed, and whose philosophy and spiritual writings informed American political thought (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 9–14). However, once the U.S. began directly trading with China and therefore experienced increased interaction with Chinese people, these idealistic myths dissipated, and frustrated U.S. traders who were only familiar with capitalist trading relations began describing the Chinese as uncivilized and corrupt (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 13). Thus, the American notions of the Orient began to align with their European counterpart's.

Hollywood depictions of Asia and Asians reflected and perpetuated these notions of the Orient as "other" (Hsing and Xing 1998, 64). For Asian men, these depictions were shaped by the

"Yellow Peril" formula: stereotypes which depicted Asians as violent hordes which threatened the U.S. nation-state (Hsing and Xing 1998, 55). Common images included Asian men as rapists and enemies of war (Hsing and Xing 1998, 55–58). Asian women, by contrast, were frequently depicted as exotically sexual: in some cases, they were represented as the dangerously manipulative "dragon lady," and in other cases, they were delicate and submissive spoils (Hsing and Xing 1998, 57–61). These images have persisted throughout the decades and continue to inform current representation.

3. Anti-miscegenation and "Yellow Face"

Closely tied to the imagination of Asia as a threat was dominant America's desire to "protect" white women from Asian men. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a convergence of sensationalist stories and other racial and gendered factors led to anxieties surrounding relationships between white women and Asian men[25] (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 127–28). These factors included the crystallization of the concept of whiteness[26], the increasing presence of Asian immigrants in the workplace and domestic sphere, stereotypes of Asian men as sexually deviant, and the transgressive consumption and modernity of the "New Woman" which threatened Puritanical morality (Beltrán and Fojas 2008, 7; Miyao 2007, 36–39, 42; S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 127–28). In addition, the pseudoscientific argument of "hybrid degeneracy" dominated conversations around racial mixing: it claimed that children of mixed race couples were impure, degenerate, psychologically unstable, and biologically and morally inferior (Beltrán and Fojas 2008, 9–10). To

[25] These anxieties emerged despite the fact that very few Asian immigrants sought to marry whites at the time (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 127).

[26] The dominant concept was of hypodescent, in which "one-drop" of non-white blood excluded an individual from being white, and it reinforced the white/nonwhite racial binary (Beltrán and Fojas 2008, 5).

reel in these fears held by white, patriarchal America, anti-Asian miscegenation laws were passed, starting with additions to the California Civil Code in 1880 (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 127).

In media industries, the response to these fears was to enact the Production Code of 1934, which, though vague, forbid presenting sexual relations between individuals of different races on screen (Beltrán and Fojas 2008, 7). As a result, when mixed race couples were portrayed, the non-white characters were frequently played by white or half-white actors to comfort audiences with the knowledge that they were not seeing "actual" miscegenation (Beltrán and Fojas 2008, 8). Examples include *Madame Butterfly* (1915), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), and *West Side Story* (1961).

Helen Zia reveals that these yellow face practices were not limited to mixed-race romantic storylines. Instead, it was routine for *any* major film and television role to be given to white actors while Asian actors were sequestered into minor parts (Zia 2000, 113). These white actors were frequently praised for their interpretations of "Asian" qualities, based primarily on stereotypes of Orientalism and Yellow Peril hysteria (Zia 2000, 114). In order to play these racialized roles, they practiced "marking" themselves with distinguishable "racial" traits: using taped eyelids and other racial cosmetology techniques to take on "Asian" features, dressing and behaving in inscrutable and otherwise Orientalized ways, and employing heavy "chop suey" accents (Hsing and Xing 1998, 66–67).

One preferred practice is making characters "Eurasian" so white actors can play Asian characters with less or no cosmetology (Hsing and Xing 1998, 75). From the film *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955) to the show *Kung Fu* (1972-1975), Hollywood has a long tradition in this vein, and it even continues putting white characters into part-Asian roles today, as shown by

Emma Stone's character in *Aloha* (2015) (Singh 2015). The main issues with the practice of yellow face, or more recently, whitewashing, are exemplified by the controversy that surrounded the *Miss Saigon* casting in 1990.

Originally produced in England by Cameron Mackintosh, the musical was being brought to Broadway, but it was announced that the Welsh actor-singer Jonathan Pryce would continue to star as the Eurasian Engineer (Zia 2000, 119). Asian American actors, who did not get a chance to audition for this prominent role, were furious, but the casting director's response was to list every Asian actor he knew of and state that none of them would be suitable for the role, ignoring the array of Asian American actors who worked outside the mainstream, the few who had succeeded in the mainstream, and the barriers to entry which prevented more Asian American actors from becoming widely visible[27] (Zia 2000, 121). The subtext was that Asian American actors were not good enough to play even themselves, but while covering the protests against the casting, the media turned the controversy against the actors, stating that they were "less qualified," were engaging in "reverse discrimination," and were trying to undermine color-blind casting[28] (Zia 2000, 122–25). The main issue, though, was not whether actors can or should play across racial barriers, but that Asian and Asian American actors rarely get the opportunity to play themselves *or* characters of other backgrounds (Zia 2000, 127–28). Though Mackintosh eventually won and Pryce played the Engineer in the first Broadway run, Pryce did stop using eye prosthetics and successive Engineers were actors of Asian descent (Zia 2000, 124, 129).

[27] And ignoring the fact that this casting director was perpetuating those same barriers which had prevented him from coming up with a better list of actors in the first place.

[28] The core conflict, then, is very similar to the controversy surrounding affirmative action. Minority players are kept from the table by discriminatory structures, call out those in power, and in response are called unqualified racists.

This pattern of protest, media ridicule and lack of immediate industry response, yet subsequent change has been played out frequently in recent years. One example is actress Scarlett Johansson, who played an Asian character in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) despite controversy and backlash (B. Lee 2018). However, in her next controversial casting as a transgender man in *Rub & Tug* (not yet released), she did end up dropping the role[29] (B. Lee 2018). Several factors likely contributed to her change of heart, but one might be found in the example of Ed Skrein, who in the previous year had publicly stepped aside to allow a more culturally appropriate actor to play a Japanese American character in *Hellboy* (2018) (Sun 2017; Couch 2017). The praise he received both within and outside of the Asian American community and the industry at large may signal a change in Hollywood, placing more of the responsibility of being culturally sensitive on the actor and actress themselves (Sun 2017).

4. Post-World War II and Constructing Asian Femininity

Historian Robert G. Lee claims that World War II was the turning point which undercut the place of Yellow Peril and white supremacy narratives in the national imagination (R. G. Lee 1999, 146). With China as an ally, Japan as an enemy, and the Allied powers' reliance on support from colonies in India, southeast Asia, and north Africa, war propelled white Americans to recognize the distinctions between Asian groups (R. G. Lee 1999, 146). In addition, Nazi doctrines of racial superiority forced the U.S. to respond with calls for equality as a moral reason to fight in the war[30] (R. G. Lee 1999, 149).

[29] That she had even been cast in the first place (by the same director of *Ghost in the Shell*) and had originally accepted the role is telling that the industry still has further to go in understanding and internalizing minority concerns related to representation.

[30] In practice, the U.S. still used race and ethnicity as ways to suppress various groups including Japanese Americans, African Americans, and Jewish Europeans seeking refuge (R. G. Lee 1999, 149).

In the post-World War II era, European colonialism broke down, and in that gap, the U.S. wanted to situate itself as a world power which championed racial tolerance (Marchetti 1993, 110). In order to set the terms of global economics and secure access to international markets and raw materials, the U.S. needed to establish military, economic, *and* ideological superiority (L. Lowe 1998, 34–35). Instead of using outright colonialism, it framed its dominance of Asia in terms of both a modernization project and a containment of communism (L. Lowe 1998, 34–35). Domestically, it conceived itself as being a "multicultural" nation instead of a white nation, and it slowly repealed the anti-Asian immigration and naturalization laws (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 236–38). These developments will be discussed further in section 5.

Gina Marchetti argues that the Hollywood melodramas set in Hong Kong both portrayed and enabled the U.S.'s self-definition as the masculine savior of a feminized Asia (Marchetti 1993, 110). She draws on the tradition of the "white knight" figure, rooted in the myth of romantic love overcoming social stigmas and the myth of the antiestablishment romantic artist transcending above a corrupt society (Marchetti 1993, 109). Despite the figure's ideological stances, she argues that it does not allow for real social change because it promotes a subservient female role and maintains the right for the dominant culture to rule (Marchetti 1993, 109). For her case studies, she analyzes *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955) and *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), where the "exotic" background allows America to assert itself as morally superior to both European colonialism and Asian communism[31] (Marchetti 1993, 110).

[31] *Sayonara* (1956), though set in Japan, displays similar assertions of American identity (R. G. Lee 1999, 161–72)

In her examination, Marchetti uncovers three myths which drive the themes of these films. The first myth is of the “white knight,” a morally pure white male savior who finds himself by saving the "ethnic" love interest from her native land[32] (Marchetti 1993, 113–18). The second myth is of “Asian femininity,” the fantasy of the passive, domestic Asian female as the ideal woman, countering the Western "new" woman[33] who engages in feminism and economic independence (Marchetti 1993, 115–17). Finally, the myth of the “Orient” lives on. In these films, the heroes' professions as artists and journalists give them license to create and interpret the Orient, and they control of the visual appearance and identities of their lovers (Marchetti 1993, 118–23).

During the 1950s and 1960s, the masculinized U.S. and femininized Asia were given bodily form. The War Brides Act of 1945 and the McCarran-Walters Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 together allowed American military servicemen and citizens to bring their spouses and children to the U.S. (R. G. Lee 1999, 162). Around 6,000 Chinese, 45,000 Japanese, and thousands of Filipino women came, making the majority of Asian immigrants women (R. G. Lee 1999, 162). These women were integrated into the U.S. conception of the American family (and the nation at large) as a modern, ethnically assimilated space (R. G. Lee 1999, 162). However, this acceptance was framed by specific narratives. *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) and *Sayonara* (1957) reveal that, in the cultural imagination, the previous association of mixed-race relationships with sexual transgression were now negated only because a superior America

[32] A clear display of white supremacy, but tempered by accompanying portrayals of either the British or U.S. Southerners holding even more pronounced views of racial superiority than the main male character (Marchetti 1993, 115; R. G. Lee 1999, 170).

[33] A newer “New” woman than the “New” woman of the early 20th century which Miyao discusses in *A Star is Born*.

"domesticized" and "liberated" (a more apt word might be "conquered") these Asian women, turning them into a symbol of ideal femininity and the mothers of a multi-ethnic nation (R. G. Lee 1999, 162, 171; Marchetti 1993, 123). Simultaneously, these images reaffirmed the heterosexual patriarchy (R. G. Lee 1999, 171).

Though Asian females were made part of the American family, Asian males continued to be marginalized in domestic life (R. G. Lee 1999, 162). Prior to WWII, anti-miscegenation laws and the restriction of Asian female immigration created "bachelor" communities of Asian men, which public health policies were able to construe as disease-ridden threats to American society (L. Lowe 1998, 33–34). The masculinity of white male citizens, closely tied to heterosexual marriage, was made at odds with the masculinity of these Asian men who were barred in one way or another from wedding and starting families (L. Lowe 1998, 34). Furthermore, the performance of "female" work such as laundry and restaurant service "femininized" Asian masculinity (L. Lowe 1998, 34).

Post-WWII, this feminized imagination of Asian men persisted and created an easy, safe way for American society to transition Asian men from "Yellow Peril threats" to members of a "multicultural" society. Evidence of this marginalized incorporation is seen on television shows like *Bachelor Father* (1957-1962) and *Bonanza* (1959-73), where Asian men were allowed into the domestic space, but as the servile help, filling a "female" role in the household (Zia 2000, 115). Another stereotype, called the "geek" by Helen Zia, depicted Asian men as hardworking, unemotional side characters, so asexual and emasculated that they couldn't threaten the normative white American family (Zia 2000, 117–18). This "acceptable," effeminate version of

Asian men was part of the creation of an assimilated "model minority," discussed further in the next section.

5. The Cold War and the Model Minority Myth

Robert Lee argues that the model minority myth constructed an acceptable path towards "Americanization" while containing three menaces of the Cold War: communism, race mixing, and homosexuality (R. G. Lee 1999, 146). The myth reveals the contradiction between the U.S.'s desire for minority groups to ethnically assimilate and its continued production of racial difference and suppression of social transformation (R. G. Lee 1999, 145). First, Asia was used to position the Cold War-era United States as a champion of capitalism. The U.S.'s local economic strategy of the Fordist Compromise[34] depended on a capitalist reconstruction of the global economy (R. G. Lee 1999, 154–56). In Asia, nationalist elites who were favorable to the U.S. replaced previous European colonial administrations, development of trade with Japan and southeast Asia counterbalanced the "loss" of China to communism, and the Pacific Rim became a market for U.S. goods and capital investment (R. G. Lee 1999, 155–56). Asia thus became one of the battlefields for the "War of Containment" against communism, in addition to Africa and Latin America (R. G. Lee 1999, 157). However, to these "Third World" nations demanding independence and self-determination, the U.S.'s domestic struggles with racial discrimination and civil rights undercut its ideological stance against communism (which emphasized social equality) and its authority to supervise this global transformation (R. G. Lee 1999, 157).

[34] The Fordist Compromise was a pattern of cooperation between labor and management (R. G. Lee 1999, 154). It was built on the logic that the working-class nuclear family would drive economic growth through the consumption of durable consumer goods (R. G. Lee 1999, 154–55).

In response to contentious race relations at home (the second menace), U.S. liberal social scientists developed an ethnicity theory which promised racial equality. When African Americans were demanding economic and political equality during the 1960s, the nation was divided on whether changes were required on the structural or individual level (R. G. Lee 1999, 150–51). That is, should the government intervene with state-sponsored social reconstruction, or did black families and black culture need to be "rehabilitated"? (R. G. Lee 1999, 150–51). Ethnicity theory, which replaced biological theories of racial superiority, asserted that, through ethnic assimilation and the removal of legal barriers, anyone could become a full participant in modern American society, with equal rights and upwards mobility (R. G. Lee 1999, 146, 158).

However, the implications of this theory were that the cultures of ethnic groups determined their social outcomes, positive or negative, and the burden of "modernizing" ethnic cultures to fit U.S. society was placed upon the shoulders of non-white groups (R. G. Lee 1999, 145, 158–59). An underlying idea behind this burden is the rag-to-riches Horatio Alger myth that, through hard work alone, individuals can escape poverty and achieve success (Ono and Pham 2009, 81). Thus, ethnicity theory evaded race-based critiques through its promotion of a "colorblind" society that tied social improvements to individual efforts rather than political organization and empowerment (R. G. Lee 1999, 160).

In the U.S., World War II also changed gender relations and expanded sexual freedom, resulting in the third menace to Cold War America: homosexuality (R. G. Lee 1999, 160). Homosexuality, like communism, became seen as a threat to national security, supposedly weakening the nation's morality (making it vulnerable to seduction, both sexually and politically), perverting the "natural order," and encouraging secrecy (a trait also tied to spies and traitors) (R.

G. Lee 1999, 161). The traditional nuclear family was thus imagined as the key to defending the "American" way of life (R. G. Lee 1999, 160). The differential placement of Asian and Asian American women and men within this family was discussed previously in section four.

To "prove" that ethnic assimilation works, Asian Americans were imagined as the model minority because of their comparative political silence and underutilization of welfare programs (R. G. Lee 1999, 151). The model minority myth portrayed Asian America as a quiet, hardworking, and successful community who took responsibility for itself and didn't need government assistance (Hsing and Xing 1998, 63; Ono and Pham 2009, 80). In effect, the myth was used to indirectly critique and undermine the rising black rights movement (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 263). However, the myth ignored factors which contributed to the community's political silence, such as the post-incarceration PTSD of the Japanese American community and the deportation fears of the Chinese American community (R. G. Lee 1999, 151–53)[35]. In addition, the model minority myth erased the diversity across Asian ethnicities. For example, though Chinese and Japanese Americans did have higher levels of education and income, other groups including Filipino Americans and Southeast Asian refugees did not, and in 1970, 40% of the latter group depended on public assistance in California (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 330).

[35] Following the founding of the communist People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese Americans replaced Japanese Americans as the targets for U.S. suspicion (R. G. Lee 1999, 152). Various laws and programs such as the Emergency Detention Act, the Trading with the Enemy Act, and the Chinese Confession Program threatened Chinese Americans with detention and deportation should they be suspected of subversive activity that supported the Communist regime (but the pretense of finding pro-China activity was also used to target domestic troublemakers) (R. G. Lee 1999, 152–53). In reality, there were very few Chinese American communists, but there *were* hundreds of "paper sons" who were threatened by the possibility of deeper investigation and subsequent deportation (R. G. Lee 1999, 152). These individuals were thus compelled to leave politically active organizations to avoid drawing attention to themselves (R. G. Lee 1999, 153).

The model minority myth and assimilation narrative have roots in the Charlie Chan character, a fictional detective created in the 1920s by Earl Derr Biggers (J. Chan 2001, 51). As a precursor to the 1960s' use of the model minority myth to suppress African Americans, Charlie Chan's image constructed Chinese Americans as model minorities, which countered the political activity of Japanese American laborers in Hawaii (J. Chan 2001, 51–52). Though the character is based on the real Honolulu detective Chang Apana, he lacks the bravery, agility, and strength that Apana had (J. Chan 2001, 54–55). Instead, Charlie Chan is depicted as a submissive, politically silent, law-abiding family man who is inferior both physically and sexually (J. Chan 2001, 53). Author Jachinson Chan argues that the character's construction by a white man and portrayal on-screen by white actors is a form of colonialism, creating a false, non-threatening image of Chinese American men in the public consciousness, and forcing Asian American males to seek hegemonic forms of masculinity instead of allowing them to define their own versions of masculinity (J. Chan 2001, 57–59). Thus, the Charlie Chan figure also adds to the long media histories of issues related to yellow face and Asian male masculinity, discussed earlier.

Kent Ono and Vincent Pham argue that the model minority myth, despite appearing to praise Asian Americans, instead perpetuates Yellow Peril narratives in disguise (Ono and Pham 2009, 81, 89). For example, the perceived educational success of Asian Americans has led to "white flight" from some Californian high schools because the "domination" of these schools by competitive Asian students creates an "unhealthy cultural isolation" (Ono and Pham 2009, 90–91). UC Berkeley, too, has been said to have too many Asians, and a 2007 article by Timothy Egan raised the concern that, because of the increasing Asian presence, Berkeley is not diverse and suffers from stereotypes of being a boring, nerdy campus (Ono and Pham 2009, 91–92). The logic

of feeling threatened by Asian students relies on the view of Asians and Asian Americans as "perpetual foreigners[36]." In other words, Asian Americans, conflated with Asians, are seen as non-American, and their increasing presence is therefore not considered beneficial to their institutions (nor America at large), but rather marks an Asian-ization of campus (and the nation) (Ono and Pham 2009, 92–93). By this formulation, Asian Americans are threatening *because* they are successful, and this fear is justified because they are socially or emotionally stunted[37] foreigners. This perpetual foreigner myth has physical consequences[38]: in the 1980s and 1990s, violence and suspicion targeted against Asian Americans increased in the face of the economic success and global political influence of Japan in the 1970s-80s and China in the 1990s (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 338–42). Thus, the model minority stereotype masks not only anti-Black racism, but also anti-Asian racism (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 330).

[36] From the 1880s, for example, Chinatowns had been treated as tourist destination for white Americans, and early media tended to represent them as completely foreign (Klein 2003, 175–76).

[37] These traits are corollaries of the model minority myth. Media depictions of Asians and Asian Americans as successful journalists, doctors, or students curb this "positive" representation with negative characteristics such as being "robotic, uncaring, and asocial" (Ono and Pham 2009, 95). These and other images based on the model minority stereotype reinforce the myth that Asian Americans are culturally and biologically wired to focus on achievement, to extreme measures criticized by the mainstream (e.g. painting Indian parents as single-mindedly drilling their children for spelling bees) (Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007, 97–98).

[38] See Vincent Chin's killing, discussed in Chapter 1. The perpetual foreigner myth also contributed to the WWII internment of Japanese Americans, who various U.S. political and military leaders suspected would aid Japanese war efforts, despite a resounding lack of evidence (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 214–15).

Chapter 3: Flower Drum Song and Crazy Rich Asians

Though the two films were released 57 years apart, *Flower Drum Song* (1961) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) nevertheless have many similarities. Both are Hollywood romantic comedies which star majority Asian casts. They use newcomers—Mei Li in *Flower Drum Song* or Rachel Chu in *Crazy Rich Asians*—as audience proxies through whom viewers can experience a place with which they may not be familiar: San Francisco, Chinatown or a wealthy, elite Singaporean society. Their cinematography builds a colorful world of opulence and glamour, with an emphasis on culturally marked costumes and set designs (Willett 2006b; Hoo 2018). Their central conflicts are found in the purported cultural divide between Americans and Asians, mapped onto generational conflicts for *Flower Drum Song* and class conflicts for *Crazy Rich Asians*. Their contexts, too, are similar: they both emerged during times when American media was increasing its multicultural productions.

The most notable difference in the production of these films is that *Flower Drum Song* was created by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II (Jewish Americans), and *Crazy Rich Asians* was directed by Jon M. Chu (a Chinese American). This chapter explores both the sociocultural changes which have allowed for that shift in production control and how having Asian Americans govern their own film representations has affected *Crazy Rich Asians*. An overview of *Flower Drum Song* and *Crazy Rich Asians* will be given in the first and second sections of this chapter, respectively. These sections review their respective novels, the adaptations, the sociocultural and production contexts, and the receptions. In the third section, the films are interpreted in context of their categorization as mainstream romantic comedies. The fourth

section discusses the ways in which accents and language function in the humor of the novel and film. Finally, this chapter ends with concluding remarks for this thesis.

1. Flower Drum Song

Novel

Chin Yang Lee (popularly known as C. Y. Lee), was born in Hunan, China in 1917 (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, iii). He left the country during the turmoil of the Second World War, arriving in the United States in 1943 to obtain his M.F.A. in playwriting at the Yale School of Drama (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, iii, ix). After the Communist Party won in China, he chose to stay, and he relocated to San Francisco, Chinatown to write for local newspapers and begin his first novel (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 260; C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, x, xi). Looking for inspiration, Lee studied scandals in the newspapers, but soon he decided to center his novel on the biggest conflicts he could find within Chinatown: the generation gap and cultural differences (Willett 2006a). From there, he wrote *The Flower Drum Song* (1957), which became a *New York Times* bestseller (Shin and Lee 2004, 77).

The novel centers around two main characters, the rich, widowed Wang Chi-yang ("Old Master Wang") and his son, Wang Ta, who has unenthusiastically enrolled in medical school to avoid looking for a job. Five years before the start of the book's timeline, Wang Chi-yang brings his two sons and family servants to the United States to avoid the Communists in China. Against the wishes of Madam Tang, his sister-in-law, he resists "Western" changes to his home and lifestyle, choosing to visit an herb doctor to treat his persistent cough[39]. Meanwhile Wang Ta

[39] The book describes Wang Chi-yang as being contrary to, not Westernization specifically, but all change, explaining that the Communist's enforcement of the Lenin uniform was enough of a departure from his customary silk gowns to be one of his motivators for leaving China (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 5).

struggles to find love, first with the already-engaged Mary, then with playgirl Linda Tung, and finally with the unattractive Helen Chao, who is driven to suicide after his rejection of her marriage proposal. His friend, Chang Ling-yu, blames Wang Ta's difficulties in love on the shortage of women in Chinatown.

In the second part of the book, Madam Tang and Wang Chi-yang find out about Helen's death and Linda's involvement in a passion-fueled shooting, and they worry about Wang Ta's romantic life. The picture-bride who they find for him falls through because of immigration difficulties, and they arrange for him to marry a half-Japanese daughter of Madam Tang's friend. At that time, May Li and her father, Old Man Li, arrive in San Francisco, Chinatown from Los Angeles. Wang Ta brings them into the Wang family home to work as servants. He and May Li fall in love, and his other marriage arrangement is canceled because neither party is interested. Then Liu Ma, one of the original family servants, frames May Li for stealing the family's clock. The humiliated May Li and her father leave the Wangs, and Wang Ta, seeking to marry May Li, decides to assert his independence from his family and follow them. Wang Chi-yang, overcome with loneliness, finds his stubbornness dissolve, and he reimagines himself as a guest living in a world which belongs to the assimilated younger generation. The book ends with his visit to a hospital to treat his cough.

Broadway and Film Adaptations

Hollywood writer and producer, Joseph Fields, purchased the rights to the book and brought it to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II to adapt into a Broadway musical (Willett 2006a). According to C. Y. Lee, Rodgers and Hammerstein, already experienced in adapting books into romantic musicals, enjoyed working with "foreign material" and, having never done "Chinese

material" before, agreed to adapt *The Flower Drum Song* (Willett 2006a). The resulting Broadway production (1958) became a national phenomenon and commercial success, nominated for six Tony awards and winning one, with extended performances on national tours and in London (Kim 2013, 1).

Universal Studios produced the similarly successful film version in 1961, which was nominated for five Academy awards and, according to Nancy Kwan and The Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization, also gained many Asian American fans (Kim 2013, 1; R&H n.d.; Wada 2001, 70). The Broadway musical and film, which C. Y. Lee believes Rodgers and Hammerstein made funnier and more commercial than his novel, centers around a love quadrangle (Shin and Lee 2004, 85). In the film, Mei Li and her father arrive by boat in San Francisco, Chinatown as undocumented immigrants (name changes from the novel to the film are noted in Table 2, below). She is a picture bride for Celestial Gardens owner Sammy Fong, but because he is interested one of his dancers, Linda Low, he offers her as a bride for Wang Chi-yang's son, Wang Ta. In the film, Madame Liang retains the role of pushing Wang Chi-yang towards assimilation, and she persuades him to let Mei Li and Wang Ta fall in love naturally. Meanwhile, since Sammy won't commit to marrying Linda, Linda has been dating Wang Ta, and the two announce their engagement at a party in the Wang family residence, with Celestial Gardens host Frankie Wing standing in as her "brother."

Next, the conflicts of the mismatched love pairings come to a head. Sammy invites the Wangs to the Celestial Gardens to expose Linda Low as a dancing girl, driving Wang Ta to drink himself into a stupor and fall asleep in Helen Chao's apartment. Mei Li discovers his jacket at Helen's place, and distraught, she enforces her original marriage contract with the unwilling

Sammy. Wang Ta visits her before the wedding, and the two realize they love each other. At the wedding, Mei Li exposes herself as an illegal immigrant, voiding the original marriage contract and freeing herself to marry Wang Ta—and Linda to marry Sammy—in a double wedding. The overall plot of the Broadway musical differs only slightly from the film (Lubbock 1962).

Table 2: The Cast of Flower Drum Song

Name in Book (1957)	**Name in Adaptations**	**Broadway (1958) and Film (1961) cast**[40]
May Li	Mei Li	• Miyoshi Umeki (Broadway, film) ○ First-gen Japanese American

Old Man Li	Dr. Li	• Conrad Yama (Broadway)
		  ○ Second-gen Japanese American
		• Kam Tong (film)
		  ○ Native-born Chinese American

Madam Tang	Madame Liang	• Juanita Hall (Broadway and film) ○ Native-born African American

Wang Ta	Wang Ta	• Ed Kenney (Broadway)
		  ○ Hawaii-born Hawaiian-Chinese and Swedish-Irish American[41]
		• James Shigeta (film)
		  ○ Hawaii-born Japanese American

Wang Chi-Yang	Wang Chi-Yang	• Keye Luke (Broadway)
		  ○ First-gen Chinese American
		• Benson Fong (film)
		  ○ Native-born Chinese American

Wang San	Wang San	• Patrick Adiarte (Broadway and film) ○ First-gen Filipino American

Linda Tung	Linda Low	• Pat Suzuki (Broadway)
		  ○ Second-gen Japanese American
		• Nancy Kwan (film)
		  ○ First-gen English/Scottish and Chinese (Cantonese) American

N/A	Sammy Fong	• Larry Blyden (Broadway) ○ Native-born Jewish American

[40] In this table, "first-gen" is used when the individual is an immigrant to their nation, "second-gen" is used when the parents of the individual are both known to be immigrants to the individual's nation, while "native-born" is used when the parental status is mixed or unknown (which differs slightly from the way the Pew Research Center uses the terms, referenced in Chapter 1). This ethnicity and nationality information was obtained from Wikipedia profiles. Of the Japanese Americans, all but Umeki and Shigeta were interned during WWII.

[41] Hawaii remained a territory of the United States until 1959, but based on U.S. Code 1405, persons born in Hawaii on/after April 30, 1900 are citizens of the United States.

		• Jack Soo (film)[42] ○ Native-born Japanese American

Helen Chao	Helen Chao	• Arabella Hong (Broadway)
		  ○ Native-born Chinese American
		• Reiko Sato (film)
		  ○ Second-gen Japanese American

N/A	Frankie Wing	• Jack Soo (Broadway) • Victor Sen Yung (film) ○ Second-gen Chinese American

Table 2, above, lists the major cast members in the Broadway production and subsequent film (Koster 1961; Playbill n.d.). Both the Broadway musical and the film were the first of their kinds to have a mostly Asian American cast[43] (Kim 2013, 1). Of the Broadway cast, only Larry Blyden and Juanita Hall[44], were not Asian (R&H n.d.). Although the characters are all Chinese or Chinese American, the rest of the cast was drawn from a variety of Asian backgrounds, mostly Japanese American[45]. The film starred, as The Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization put it, "almost every famous Asian-American face in Hollywood" (R&H n.d.). Miyoshi Umeki had already gained popularity for her role in *Sayonara* (1957) as the demure and ideal wife, Katsumi, and Nancy Kwan for her performance in *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) film as the titular prostitute (R. G. Lee 1999, 175–76; Marchetti 1993, 120). These two actresses' roles in *Flower Drum Song*

[42] Jack Soo was formerly Jack Suzuki (renamed to have a more "Chinese"-sounding last name) (Willett 2006c).

[43] Rodgers and Hammerstein and their director, Gene Kelly, aimed to cast Asian actors over white actors in yellowface, and they actively sought out Asian performers (R&H n.d.; Willett 2006c).

[44] African American actress Juanita Hall had previously played Bloody Mary in *South Pacific* (1949 Broadway musical and 1958 film) (Kim 2013, 34). Originally, Anna May Wong was under contract to play Madame Liang in the film version, reflecting the creators' goals to have an all-Asian cast, but she became ill and unfortunately died before filming could begin (Monji 2016; Bai 2018).

[45] Rodgers wrote in his autobiography: "The ethnically mixed cast certainly didn't lessen the total effect; What was important was that the actors gave the illusion of being Chinese. This demonstrates one of the most wonderful things about theatre audiences. People want to believe what they see on a stage, and they will gladly go along with whatever is done to achieve the desired effect" (Rodgers 1975, 295). Embedded in his statement is the longstanding myth that race is visible, discussed in Chapter 1.

were influenced by their previous films. To illustrate, Nancy Kwan's sultry and glamorous Linda Low in the film was a very different interpretation from Pat Suzuki's klutzy version on Broadway[46] (Willett 2006a; R. G. Lee 1999, 175). The film's promotional materials wielded Nancy Kwan's commercial appeal to their advantage, featuring her image more often than Academy Award-winning Umeki's (R. G. Lee 1999, 176). The film also helped launch the careers of Asian American actors who were "discovered" in the casting process, like Jack Soo, who went on to became the first Asian American lead in a regular television series (Willett 2006c; Adachi 2009). In addition, *Flower Drum Song* helped cement James Shigeta, who had already starred in a number of films, as Hollywood's first Asian romantic leading man since Sessue Hayakawa (Vallance 2014).

Sociocultural and Production Contexts

The novel, Broadway musical, and film came out during the post-World War II/Cold War era, concurrent with the start of the Civil Rights movement (1950s-60s) and immediately before the first Asian American movement gained traction (Chapter 1). The second wave feminist movement would soon begin in the 1960s-1970s, and the term "model minority" would be coined in 1966, coincident with immigration reforms that skewed the demographics of Asian America towards wealthier, educated immigrants (discussed in Chapter 1) (Burkett 2019; Hằng and Phùng 2018, 87). As Chapter 2 explains, this time period was dominated by narratives which aimed to situate the United States as a multicultural, ethnically assimilated nation, yet the main images of Asians as Orientalized and feminized—and later as model minorities—put strict boundaries around what kinds of assimilation were acceptable.

[46] At the time of the film's production, Pat Suzuki was seven months pregnant and, as she stated, "would have had some trouble playing a stripper" (Thomas 1963).

Placing *Flower Drum Song* in the context of the period's Broadway shows helps demonstrate these shifting cultural negotiations. Before *Flower Drum Song*, Rodgers and Hammerstein had written two other book-to-musical adaptations which featured Orientalized backgrounds and characters: *South Pacific* (1949) and *The King and I* (1951). These three are commonly called the duo's "Chopsticks Musicals," and all were about romantic love overcoming cultural conflict (Kim 2013, 3; R. G. Lee 1999, 173). A reviewer from the *New Yorker* critiqued Rodgers and Hammerstein's homogeneous treatment of Orientalized groups (R. G. Lee 1999, 173). She pointed out that the exoticized portrayals of the native Pacific Islanders and Siamese in the earlier two musicals were once again recycled for the immigrant Chinese Americans of *Flower Drum Song*, despite clear differences in circumstances (R. G. Lee 1999, 173). While some of the character traits discussed by the reviewer did not necessarily originate from the duo (e.g. Mei Li's unfamiliarity with kissing was adapted from the novel), the two certainly did transform the outspoken May Li of the book into a shy and naïve girl for the musical[47] (Rodgers 1975, 295).

The American setting of the musical is significant. The shift with *Flower Drum Song* from visiting exotic places to localizing and "Americanizing" the exotic was a reflection of the flourishing liberal multiculturalism which celebrated immigration and assimilation as essential to the American experience[48] (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 315). Other contemporaneous Broadway musicals shared the same impulse: *West Side Story* (1957) put an "ethnic" twist on *Romeo and Juliet* with two New York gangs—one white and the other Puerto Rican—taking the place of the Montagues

[47] Mei Li's childlike sweetness is reminiscent of Miyoshi Umeki's previous role as Katsumi in *Sayonara*. Umeki was to be typecast yet again as the servile Asian female in her later role as Mrs. Livingston in the television series, *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1969-1972).

[48] J. F. Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants* was published in the same year that *Flower Drum Song* started playing (1958).

and Capulets; *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) ends with a Jewish family fleeing to America to escape the anti-Semitic pogroms of pre-revolutionary Russia (S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 315).

In the case of *Flower Drum Song*, the spectacle of the Broadway musical, with its carnivalesque singing and dancing, is particularly useful for promoting liberal multiculturalism because it provides a utopian escapism from racial discrimination[49] (Kim 2013, 5). It did not have to depart from the existing musical conventions to do so. As Hammerstein told *Newsweek*, their goal in making *Flower Drum Song* was to create an entertaining show, and compared to their previous musicals (which had featured miscegenation, a suicide, or changes to the musical format), it "doesn't break any new dramaturgical ground" (White 1958). *New York Times* reviewer Bosley Crowther noted that its characters and jokes are reminiscent of older comedic plays about white ethnic immigrants leaving the old world for the new one (Crowther 1961).

Evolving Receptions

Upon their releases, the book, Broadway musical, and film achieved commercial success, as discussed earlier. Those involved in the creative process considered *Flower Drum Song* revolutionary for its Asian American cast and humane depictions of its Chinese American characters. C. Y. Lee was himself intimately acquainted with the lack of Chinese American representation. After showing the play he wrote for his final M.F.A. project, he was scouted by an agent who like his writing. She advised him to switch from playwriting to fiction because a Chinese American play which featured Chinese stories would never sell; there was no Broadway

[49] Though the lengthy immigration and citizenship process are briefly mocked, and illegal immigration figures prominently in the film, the racialized aspect of these exclusions goes unexamined, and the barriers are ultimately overcome with little resistance through celebratory moments (the graduation party, the "Chop Suey" song, and the wedding).

precedent for it (Shin and Lee 2004, 87–88). In that production climate, the support of Joseph Fields and the cultural weight of Rodgers and Hammerstein were crucial to the development and success of *Flower Drum Song*. Their decision to use as many Asian actors as possible even resulted in the director of the musical, Gene Kelly, asking C. Y. Lee for help finding cast members[50] (Shin and Lee 2004, 83; Willett 2006c; R&H n.d.). As for the cast, Nancy Kwan was excited that Asians were playing the Asian characters, Patrick Adiarte has reflected on the rarity of finding an "unaccented" Asian role like his, and James Shigeta has said that he was drawn to his part because it wasn't a Western stereotype of the "Orientals"[51] (Willett 2006c; Yardley 2017; Bai 2018). The show at least appeared to be an improvement in Asian American representations when compared to the other Broadway show playing across the street: *The World of Suzie Wong* (1958), which was heavily criticized as clichéd[52] and had to be changed from a tedious drama to a comedy to keep audiences from leaving mid-show (Haydon 2017).

Reviewers from *Boston Daily Record* and *Variety* magazine who saw the Boston tryouts considered *Flower Drum Song* to be a hit and one of Rodgers and Hammerstein's major works

[50] C. Y. Lee's participation in the production of the Broadway musical was largely limited to this function. He did not raise questions about Rodgers and Hammerstein's changes, claiming that his familiarity with the difficulties of adapting a novel into a play caused his reticence (Shin and Lee 2004, 84–85). He has also said that he wanted to learn by watching Rodgers and Hammerstein during the tryout period, indicating that he respected their experience (Shin and Lee 2004, 82). For David Henry Hwang's 2002 adaptation, he did offer one suggestion: to remove a scene in which refugees tear up Mao Ze Dong's picture (Shin and Lee 2004, 80–81).

[51] That year, Shigeta also played the Japanese husband of a white American woman in *Bridge to the Sun* (1961). Though both roles did depart from typical representations of Asian males, they also contained other stereotypes of the model minority and the traditionalist Japanese foreigner, respectively. Some viewers thought *Flower Drum Song*'s stereotypes were less egregious than its contemporaries: David Henry Hwang, who had seen the movie, claimed that the characters in *Flower Drum Song* seemed like real people instead of inhumanly bad (Fu Manchu) or inhumanly good (Charlie Chan) (Willett 2006c).

[52] The "Asian prostitute," for example, had already been played by Anna May Wong in multiple films by this point (Monji 2016). Interestingly, neither of the two quoted critiques were about the Asian prostitute specifically so much as about dusty clichés and the idealized prostitute figure in general.

(White 1958). Other reviews of the show were mixed (Wada 2001, 70). Though the movie was deemed by Crowther as retaining the show's strong points ("colorfulness and pleasant music") and being alright in other aspects, it garnered more criticism from *Variety* magazine (Crowther 1961). The magazine wrote, "the fundamental charm, grace, and novelty of [the Broadway hit] has been overwhelmed by the sheer opulence and glamour with which Ross Hunter has translated it to the screen. As a film, it emerges a curiously unaffecting, unstable and rather undistinguished experience" (Variety Staff 1960).

During the first Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s, activists rejected *Flower Drum Song*—by then associated mostly with the show and film—as "inauthentic" primarily because it was created by non-Asians (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, xiv–xv). They felt that it both perpetuated Orientalist stereotypes of Asians and, as filmmaker Renee Tajima observed, gave rise to a new generation of model minority stereotypes (Hsing and Xing 1998, 63; Shin and Lee 2004, 77). When Asian American ethnic studies were being established, C. Y. Lee's novel and his picture of the Chinese American experience were excluded from the literary canon (Shin and Lee 2004, 77–78). Playwright David Henry Hwang later attributed this omission to first, an inability to separate the novel from its association with the musical, and second, to "reverse-snobbery," which also condemned the novel as "inauthentic" for achieving marketplace success with white audiences (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, xv).

In addition, there were a few critics who said the book itself was stereotypical and had a touristic quality[53] (Shin and Lee 2004, 85; S. S.-H. Lee 2014, 260; C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, xix). Lee

[53] These criticisms of pandering to white audiences were also raised against Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) (Fickle 2014, 68). Christina Klein argues that this tourist-guide quality—also found in Pardee Lowe's

contested the criticism about stereotypes, saying that his novels are an "accurate portrayal of people during the period [he] was writing about," and Hwang claims that those critiques are based on superficial, overly simplistic readings (Shin and Lee 2004, 85; C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, xix–xx). Nevertheless, the novel soon went out of print, and the Broadway show was not revived (Shin and Lee 2004, 77; R&H n.d.). Most subsequent analyses have focused on the film, and many critics from the 1990s onwards consider the film indicative of a dominant United States desire to turn a previously foreignized Asian America into an ethnic commodity (Kim 2013, 4). They claim that the film promotes multiculturalism over ethnic essentialism and supports liberal, democratic capitalism over Soviet Union communism[54] (Kim 2013, 4).

In 2002, Hwang, best known for his play *M. Butterfly* (1988), brought a new adaptation of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical to Broadway, reusing the original songs but changing the plot and tone (Shin and Lee 2004, 77). His goal was to shift the perspective of the musical from the original's "tourist's-eye-view"[55] to a point of view coming from within the Chinatown community (Willett 2006c). As a result of his initiatives, interest in both Lee's novel and the film were reignited. The book was reissued in 2002 with a new introduction from Hwang[56], and a DVD

Father and Glorious Descent (1943) and Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950)—countered earlier images of Chinatown as either exotic or socially degraded places (Klein 2003, 175–76).

[54] These analyses, especially Robert G. Lee's, have greatly informed the contents of this thesis.

[55] He uses the lyrics of the song, "Grant Avenue," as an example: "You travel there in a trolley. In a trolley up you climb" (Willett 2006a). The lyrics appear to be directed at an audience from outside Chinatown. Indeed, the only white people in the movie, besides the robber, are tourist-like audience members viewing the performances in Celestial Gardens.

[56] C. Y. Lee passed away on November 8, 2018 at the age of 102 (Seelye 2019). Because of the renewed interest in his work, Lee's story has fortunately been preserved in many interviews and recordings from the early 2000s.

version of the film was released in 2006 with additional special features[57] (Shin and Lee 2004, 78). To bring this revival to the stage, Hwang tested reactions to the idea of a new *Flower Drum Song*, and he found that critical attitudes towards the film have softened since the 1970s and 80s protests in which he participated (Wada 2001, 74). Currently, Rodgers and Hammerstein are generally praised for opening doors for Asian American talent while criticized for exoticizing Asian America[58] (Wada 2001, 72–74; Willett 2006c).

2. Crazy Rich Asians

Novel

In 1973, Kevin Kwan was born in Singapore to an old and established Chinese family[59] and moved to Houston, Texas at the age of 11 (Jose 2018; Christensen 2013; Chiu 2018). Though he doesn't describe his life in Singapore as particularly lavish or ostentatious (the family's old money was mostly gone by the time he was born), upon his move to American suburbia, he began to realize the quiet luxury of his paternal grandparents' home and lifestyle, the wealth of his friends' families, and the prominence of the people he met through his journalist aunt (Jose 2018; Gross 2018). Many years later, in 2009, his father was diagnosed with cancer (Jose 2018). During their

[57] Laurence Maslon, theatre and film historian, made a statement in the DVD special features that praised the same touristic quality of the musical that Hwang and critics found issue with: "Great musicals, whether they're stage or film, take you on a journey to someplace you've never been...You get to enter a world that a very small group of people ever have entered, which is Chinatown in San Francisco. So, Rodgers and Hammerstein, working with Joseph Fields, have given us an entrée…into this world, that if we went to San Francisco, we wouldn't be a part of" (Willett 2006a). In his description of Chinatown as a secluded travel destination and exclusive community, he reveals the persistence of the tendency to foreignize Asian people and communities within America.

[58] The MANAA (Media Action Network for Asian Americans) video guide, for example, describes the film as an unrealistic depiction of 1960s Chinatown. However, the guide also recognizes the film's place as one of the only Hollywood productions with an almost all-Asian cast and recommends seeing it to enjoy the veteran Asian American talent (Payne 1998).

[59] Incidentally, one of Kevin Kwan's cousins is actress Nancy Kwan (Bai 2018; Gross 2018).

drives to chemotherapy appointments, the two would reminisce about their time in Singapore (Jose 2018; Chiu 2018). Following his father's death in 2010, Kwan began writing a novel as a way to preserve their shared memories (Kwan 2018). That novel would become *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), which went on to be an international bestseller (Sun and Ford 2018).

In the book, Rachel Chu, an economics professor at NYU, has been raised in America by her single mother, Kerry Chu. Her boyfriend, fellow history professor Nick Young, invites her to his home country of Singapore where he will be the best man at Colin Khoo and Araminta Lee's wedding. In Singapore, Rachel finds out from her friend, Goh Peik Lin, that Colin and Araminta are part of extremely wealthy families. Though no one in Peik Lin's family has heard of Nick, upon arriving at the ancestral estate of Nick's paternal grandmother (Shang Su Yi), they discover that the tabloid-shy Young family is old-money rich.

Meanwhile, Nick's mother, Eleanor Young, and the other upper crust families of Singapore find out about Rachel. Egged on by her prestige-obsessed friends, Eleanor digs into Rachel's background. She disapproves of Rachel and wants Nick to marry a girl from their social circles who would be accepted by the extended Young family. Her concern partially stems from the past: Eleanor herself experienced disapproval from Shang Su Yi, and she decided to let Su Yi raise Nick so that he would have a better chance of inheriting the estate. Many of these wealthy families view Rachel as a gold-digger, and their socialite daughters bully her at Araminta's bachelorette party and wedding. Nick decides to propose to Rachel to prove his love for her, but his plan is intercepted by his mother and grandmother, who reveal to Rachel that Kerry's ex-husband, Fang Min, is alive and in jail. An upset Rachel plans to fly to China to meet him, but Nick brings Kerry to Singapore so that the mother and daughter can talk. Kerry reveals to Rachel that

her ex-husband had abused her, and she fell in love with another man, Kao Wei, who is Rachel's real father. The book ends with Rachel's reconciliation with her mother and with Nick.

At the same time as Rachel and Nick's story unfolds, Nick's cousin, Astrid Teo (née Leong), sees her marriage to Michael Teo fall apart. Michael, an entrepreneur at a tech startup, is unhappy with the extreme wealth disparity between Astrid and himself, and he feels rejected by Astrid's family for his lack of pedigree. He tricks her into believing he is having an affair, but Astrid's old boyfriend, Charlie Wu, helps her track him down. Michael reveals his pretense and tells Astrid he wants to leave her because he doesn't want to stand in the way of her relationship with her family. Because Astrid still loves Michael, Charlie arranges to acquire Michael's company and vest him with stock options to increase his net worth, in the hopes of making Astrid happy.

Kevin Kwan has been extensively interviewed about his inspirations for the novel. He initially intended to write a "dark story" about the obscene and ridiculous wealth disparity in Singapore, but the novel eventually became a social satire (Kwan 2018)[60]. Elements of the book such as the rich, upper class Singaporean society and politics of the extended family were loosely drawn from his childhood in Singapore (Christensen 2013). However, Kwan has said that his own family is not "crazy rich" when compared to the characters in his novel (Kwan 2018). Some of the experiences he draws on also came after his move to the United States, when he witnessed rapid increases in wealth each time he visited Hong Kong (Kwan 2018). He claims that he even had to "tone down" the excessive decadence that he witnessed because his editor found those details too unbelievable for readers (Christensen 2013).

[60] The interview cited here was from an event, *A Conversation with Kevin Kwan*, at The Long Center for Performing Arts in Austin, Texas. Journalist and author Jeff Yang (father of *Fresh Off the Boat*'s Hudson Yang) acted as the moderator/interviewer.

Kwan unabashedly owns the voyeuristic nature of his novel, considering it an unprecedented Asian perspective on the lives of the wealthy elite, a topic which commonly features European or American aristocrats and socialites (e.g. *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015)) (Christensen 2013). He explains that his goal in writing the novel was to "introduce a contemporary Asia to a North American audience," and the novel was not aimed at Singaporean audiences (Govani 2015). Kwan considers the setting in Asia fundamental to his story because he believes the rapid accumulation of wealth in China has created a sudden rise in new billionaires and fortunes which have affected the "old-money" families of Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and the Philippines[61] (Christensen 2013).

Regarding the book's contents, Kwan has called it a family drama that examines the complexity of family relationships as well as a generational and cultural divide (Christensen 2013). According to Kwan, the struggle is between the older generations with their traditional Chinese family values and the Westernized, younger generations who don't believe or know those rules[62]

[61] In light of the film version, Andrew Liu analyzes the wealth accumulation in Singapore in an article published in *n+1* magazine (Liu 2018). After providing a history of Singapore's economic development, he notes conflicts between modern economics (represented by Rachel) and landed wealth (represented by Eleanor). He finds additional conflict between the different forms of historical wealth accumulation that have resulted in diasporic labor divisions. He also asserts that the 20th century capitalist development of Singapore, which has led to both economic growth and widening inequality, repeats the patterns of Western Europe and North America in the preceding century. However, partly because of their positions as post-colonial subjects (or in China's case, because of colonial-like interferences), Asian countries' economic development is framed as "catching up" to the North Atlantic. Thus, when the Asian diasporic creators of *Crazy Rich Asians* aimed for power and mainstream representations in Hollywood, they created a film which tenuously balances between a) the struggles for legitimacy amongst Asian capital (and diaspora) and b) the North Atlantic's modern "Yellow Peril" fears of Asian investment and economic forces.

[62] Kwan uses the example of his character Nick Young, who was born in Singapore but absorbed "Western" values from his education in Britain (Christensen 2013). However, within the book, the divide is not nearly so simplistic: though Shang Su Yi derides the Westernization of her son and grandson, Rachel notices that the grandmother's home and lifestyle have been heavily influenced by British practices (Kwan 2013, 336).

(Christensen 2013). Kwan thinks that his novel celebrates not only the wealth of Singapore, but the rich cultural lives and exquisite taste of (some of) its residents (Christensen 2013).

Film Adaptation

The plot of the film roughly follows that of the novel, with more of a focus on Rachel and Nick's storyline than Astrid and Michael's. The main difference is in the ending: after Kerry shares her story with Rachel, Rachel meets up with Nick. He proposes to her, but she turns him down. She invites Eleanor to play a game of mahjong, and during the game, she reveals that she has sacrificed her future with Nick so that he can be happy and stay connected to his family. As she and Kerry board a flight home, Nick follows them onto the plane and proposes to Rachel with his mother's ring. They stay another night in Singapore for their engagement party.

Astrid's ending is also altered. Instead of reconnecting with Charlie (except in a brief mid-credits scene) and finding out that Michael's affair is fake, she confronts Michael as he packs to leave their shared apartment. Astrid tells him that she will be the one moving out. She then says that it was his cowardice and not her family's money that ended their relationship. With both changes, the film gives greater autonomy and strength of character to its women.

Before the book was even released, Kevin Kwan was already being approached for its adaptation rights, and soon after, he met with various interested producers to sift through their pitches (Chris Lee 2018). Many of them, he said, were seeking to break into the Chinese market[63], a desire heightened by the then-recent Chinese box office success of another movie about rich Chinese families, *Tiny Times* (2013) (Sun and Ford 2018; Kwan 2018). Ultimately, Kwan selected

[63] Hollywood has become increasingly dependent on Asian investment for its productions, and global audiences for its profits (Ho 2018).

Nina Jacobson and Brad Simpson from Color Force to produce the film (Sun and Ford 2018). The reason for his selection was that the pair had a track record of adapting books into films (e.g. *The Hunger Games* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* franchises), they were the only producers who focused on doing justice to the story over using the film to enter the Chinese market, and they were the only ones who had read the book[64] (Kwan 2018).

Kwan optioned the film for $1 (with further compensation as the project was made) in exchange for continued involvement in the decision making processes (Sun and Ford 2018; Chris Lee 2018). The team selected Ivanhoe Pictures as their financing partner, whose branches in Hong Kong and Singapore would facilitate the filming process (Chris Lee 2018). The Los Angeles-based company specialized in "Asian-focused content" for China, indicating that, despite Kwan's stated reasons for selecting Color Force, the team still wanted success in the Chinese cinematic marketplace (Sun and Ford 2018; Chris Lee 2018).

In 2016, Jon M. Chu, influenced by Twitter's anti-whitewashing movement (discussed later), was looking to make a film related to his Asian American cultural identity (Chris Lee 2018; Guerrasio 2018). After he was brought on as the director of *Crazy Rich Asians*, he made a few adjustments to get his dream cast, which included not just Asian Americans, but international Asian stars (a portion of the cast is listed in Table 3, below) (Sun and Ford 2018). First, production was pushed back to accommodate Constance Wu's availability (Sun and Ford 2018). Second, writer Adele Lim was brought on to add cultural specificity and emotional authenticity to Peter Chiarelli's screenplay (Sun and Ford 2018). Her addition was in response to Michelle Yeoh's

[64] Wendi Deng, who had also read and enjoyed the book, was the first to approach Kwan for the adaptation rights (Sun and Ford 2018). Her vision for the film was perfectly in line with his, but timing issues prevented them from proceeding on the project together (Sun and Ford 2018).

request that her character Eleanor be more than a tiger mom stereotype (Sun and Ford 2018). Yeoh was not alone in providing input for the film. In making *Crazy Rich Asians*, Jon M. Chu was actively invested in avoiding cultural clichés, using Kwan, the cast, and the crew as on-set experts for lifestyle and culture (Chris Lee 2018; Ho 2018). Together, they worked to get the details right, from the fashion and jewelry to the food and language, and Chu even hired a mahjong expert to choreograph the climactic scene between Rachel and Eleanor (Ho 2018).

Table 3: The Cast of Crazy Rich Asians

Character Name	**Film Cast**	**Ethnicity and Nationality of Cast**[65]
Rachel Chu	Constance Wu	Second-gen Taiwanese American
Kerry Chu	Tan Kheng Hua	Native-born Chinese (Teochew & Hokkien) Singaporean[66]
Nick Young	Henry Golding	Native-born Iban and English Malaysian
Eleanor Young	Michelle Yeoh	Native-born Chinese (Hokkien) Malaysian
Ah Ma (Shang Su Yi)	Lisa Lu	First-gen Chinese American
Astrid Young Teo	Gemma Chan	Second-gen Chinese British
Michael Teo	Pierre Png	Native-born Peranakan Singaporean
Peik Lin Goh	Awkwafina	Native-born Chinese and Korean American
Wye Mun Goh	Ken Jeong	Second-gen Korean American
Neenah Goh	Koh Chieng Mun	Native-born Singaporean
P.T. Goh	Calvin Wong	Native-born Malaysian[67]
Oliver T'sien	Nico Santos	First-gen Filipino American
Araminta Lee	Sonoya Mizuno	First-gen Japanese and English/Argentinian British
Colin Khoo	Chris Pang	Native-born Chinese Australian
Bernard Tai	Jimmy O. Yang	First-gen Chinese American
Eddie Cheng	Ronny Chieng	Native-born Chinese Malaysian
Fiona Cheng	Victoria Loke	Native-born Singaporean
Alistair Cheng	Remy Hii	Native-born Chinese-Malaysian and English Australian
Kitty Pong	Fiona Xie	Native-born Singaporean
Amanda Ling	Jing Lusi	First-gen Chinese British
Alix Young	Selena Tan	Native-born Singaporean
Felicity Young	Janice Koh	Native-born Singaporean

[65] This ethnicity and nationality information was obtained primarily from Wikipedia and IMDb profiles. Some ethnicity information has not been disclosed, and many listed nationalities are reductive (an individual might have been born, raised, educated, and working in different countries). Ronny Chieng, for example, was born in Malaysia, raised in the United States and Singapore, and educated in Australia. This oversimplification is also present in Table 2.

[66] From a *Medium* article (Bui 2018).

[67] From *Geek & Sundry* (Gaviola 2018).

The cast of the movie had an assortment of experiences when making the film. Several have been involved in projects where they were one of the few Asians on set, including Gemma Chan, Awkwafina, Ken Jeong, Jimmy O. Yang, and Nico Santos. These individuals have expressed the joys of working on a project with many other Asian cast members (Chris Lee 2018; Sun and Ford 2018). Ronny Chieng has commented on the rarity of Hollywood roles which ask for characters with Malaysian accents like his (Sun and Ford 2018). Self-identified "international actress" Tan Kheng Hua has had most of her career in Singapore, where she says multiracial Asian-cast shows and films are commonplace, and "diversity" isn't a term used in their marketing (Bui 2018). She finds that labels like "immigrant" and "Asian American" over-define their respective categories, which can become limiting (Bui 2018). However, she understands that Asian American actors have had very different experiences than hers, and that the racial politics of the United States begets the use of these labels (Bui 2018).

The film also introduced several acting newcomers, most notably former-BBC travel correspondent, Henry Golding[68] (Chris Lee 2018). After his casting, Golding's biracial identity provoked some backlash (Sun and Ford 2018). In response to criticisms that he is "not Asian enough" to play Nick, Golding pointed out the contradictions in Asian profiling practices, since he had spent his childhood in Malaysia and had always been labeled as Asian during his time in Britain (Sun and Ford 2018). The variety of interpretations that this global cast has made of their experiences is symptomatic of the film's transnational contexts, which also play a role in its reception, discussed later.

[68] *Crazy Rich Asians* has launched Golding's acting career. He has also starred in *A Simple Favor* (2018) and the soon-to-be-released *Last Christmas* (2019), *Monsoon* (2019), and *The Gentlemen* (2020) (Amsden 2019).

When it was time to choose a distributor for the film, Jon M. Chu and Kevin Kwan narrowed their options down to two contenders: Netflix and Warner Bros. (Sun and Ford 2018). Netflix offered complete artistic freedom, a greater upfront payment, and a guarantee that all of Kwan's books in the *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy would be turned into movies (Sun and Ford 2018). Despite Netflix's better financial offer, Kwan and Chu chose Warner Bros. because it provided the high-profile of a major Hollywood studio, a wide-reaching theatrical release, and public proof of the film's performance (Sun and Ford 2018). Additionally, audiences would have to make a greater effort to see the film in theatres, so Chu felt that their choice was a way to validate to Asian American audiences that they are worth that extra effort (Chris Lee 2018).

Their decision was ultimately a gamble: if the film succeeded at the box office (which romantic comedies had been struggling to do in the preceding years), it could open the doors to more opportunities for onscreen diversity; if it failed, there was a chance that studios would decide not to pursue other Asian-led films (Sun and Ford 2018; Chris Lee 2018). Of course, because Asian Americans only make up a small percentage of the U.S. population, the film could not rely on them alone for views: it would also have to appeal to wide audiences and ideally to international markets (Sun and Ford 2018). This pressure to succeed stemmed primarily from the film's place as the first Hollywood studio movie with an all-Asian cast to be released in the 25 years since *Joy Luck Club* (1993), a fact also used in much of the film's promotion (Wang 2018).

Sociocultural and Production Contexts

Fresh Off the Boat: Narrowcasting and Constance Wu's Breakout Performance

Pre-1980s, three broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) dominated television and aimed to create broadly appealing shows for the masses (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 9). Since

then, cable and streaming networks have fragmented audiences by creating shows aimed at more "niche," previously ignored viewers (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 9, 122). This "narrowcasting" in the post-network era, paired with the widespread adoption of the internet and the emergence of user-generated content, has allowed audiences to access media entertainment on their own terms (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 9). The United States has also seen a recent popularization of discourse about race and identity politics (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 196). Simultaneously, YouTube (one of the digital platforms where users can post their own media content) has contributed to the increase in Asian American representation by giving voice and bringing fame to content-creators like Ryan Higa, Kevin Wu, and Michelle Phan (Hằng and Phùng 2018, 89).

As all these factors converged, a shift occurred within the major American broadcast networks. Competing for the increasingly divided attention of audiences with access to alternative and more representational forms of entertainment, the networks have increased "color-blind" and "multicultural" hiring practices in both the writer's room and onscreen, as well as the number of shows featuring a "mostly non-white cast" or "non-white actors as co-leads" (Hằng and Phùng 2018, 89; Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 183). Out of these contexts emerged ABC's family sitcom, *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-present), based on chef Eddie Huang's memoir by the same name (2013). Centered around the lives of a Taiwanese American family that moves to Orlando, Florida, the show stars an Asian American cast, the first to do so in the 20 years after Margaret Cho's *All-American Girl* (1994-1995), and the first to achieve syndication status (Hằng and Phùng 2018, 89, 94; Huang 2019).

Although the show embodies the model minority stereotype, Hằng and Phùng argue that it has a "realistic and humane" touch: that is, the specific details about events, characters, environments, and Taiwanese American life[69] break the show away from the all-(mainstream white)-American or all-Asian dichotomy that *All-American Girl* and *Flower Drum Song* both demonstrate (Hằng and Phùng 2018, 96, 99). Thus, the show feels "authentic" when it's not (it diverges significantly from Eddie Huang's memoir), and it tells a "relatable" story from an Asian American perspective (Hằng and Phùng 2018, 97). According to show creator Nahnatchka Khan, *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish* (2014-present) signal television comedy's re-embracement of discussions about race, which had been largely absent following the end of Norman Lear's 1970s shows (O'Connell 2019). In response to the 2016 election of the anti-immigration Trump administration, *Fresh Off the Boat*, already experienced in dealing with controversial topics, featured a season arc about the mother of the family, Taiwanese immigrant Jessica Huang, obtaining her American citizenship (O'Connell 2019).

In the show, Constance Wu plays the unapologetically confident, funny, and sometimes vulnerable Jessica (Zhang 2015). Her time working on *Fresh Off the Boat* gave Wu experiences which would later influence her involvement with *Crazy Rich Asians*. First, she gained the confidence to advocate for changes to the projects she works on (Zhang 2015). Second, because *Fresh Off the Boat* broke the "drought" in shows featuring Asian American casts, she has already had to deal with the burden of representation and address challenging questions about portraying Asian Americans. For example, though Jessica seems to play out certain stereotypes,

[69] For example, the show uses Chinese stink tofu instead of a more generic "Asian" dish (Hằng and Phùng 2018, 97)

with a "tiger mom" parenting style and an accent faked by Wu, Wu asserts that the alternative to portraying Jessica this way—dodging the stereotypes—does not fix issues of representation (Zhang 2015). Instead, she says that stereotyped characters, instead of being the butt of jokes, should become the centers of the show or movie, with all their specificities and motivations, so that audiences learn the characters' whole story and the dehumanizing power of the stereotype is removed (Wang 2018; Feeney 2015; Jones 2017). "Specificity" is Wu's favorite path for constructing Asian American representations. She claims that it is not the antithesis of relatability; instead, it lends authenticity to stories and gives them greater "universal" appeal than trying to satisfy everyone (Feeney 2015; Zhang 2015).

The third effect of working on *Fresh Off the Boat* was that Wu's attention was drawn to issues of Asian American representation (Hess 2018). Her accompanying fame afforded her the platform upon which she could become a visible advocate for change in Hollywood (Wong 2018). On Twitter, in interviews, and on panels, Wu has spoken out about systemic issues within Hollywood such as whitewashing practices, color-blind casting, and sexual misconduct (Sun 2018a; Wong 2018). She states that she has lost roles and turned down others in service of her goals to support Asian American communities (Sun 2016; Wong 2018).

Altogether, the cumulative cultural weight and experience of Wu as both a star and an advocate allowed her ask Jon M. Chu to change the production schedule and script of *Crazy Rich Asians*[70]. Her advocacy also lends credence to the director's assertion that the film is "not a movie,

[70] Constance Wu suggested removing dialogue from the screenplay (originating in the book) which reaffirmed the stereotype of the undatable Asian man (Sun and Ford 2018). In the novel, Rachel asserts that she has a "no Asian guys" dating policy, but Wu stated that allowing Nick to be the exception to the rule only reaffirms that rule, and she didn't want to dignify the policy by including it in the movie (Kwan 2013, 87–92; Nordine 2018).

it's a movement" (Christina Lee 2018). In response to backlash stemming from "impossibly high" standards (e.g. that the film, focusing on stars of East Asian descent, does not adequately represent Singapore's demographics), Wu recycled the arguments she honed while defending *Fresh Off the Boat*[71]. That is, she understands the desire people have to see themselves onscreen, but no one film or show can address the entirety of a non-monolithic Asian America (Feeney 2015; Wang 2018; Tran 2018; De Souza 2018). Instead, she sees *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Fresh Off the Boat* as starting points from which more stories about different Asian American experiences can be told (Zhang 2015; Wang 2018; De Souza 2018).

Wu's situation can be placed within the histories of Asian American media creators, introduced in Chapter 1. In the 1980s, Asian American feature filmmaking was made possible by the critical mass of Asian American actors, bankable cultural properties, and writers that grew out of the 1960s and 1970s Asian American movement and independent film scene (Tajima 1991, 28). Those films, however, were typically either a) feature films limited to art house circuits or b) documentaries which, as part of PBS's "multicultural education" programming, were separated from mainstream entertainment (Tajima 1991, 24, 28). Building on those foundations, Wu's journey is thus indicative of the continued growth in the cultural and economic power of Asian American talent and creators. They have formed a new critical mass that allows them to both draw investment from, and become incorporated into, the mainstream industry (Liu 2018).

[71] Wu did not invent these arguments, but rather follows in and adds to the tradition of other writers, scholars, and advocates. For example, she borrows author Viet Thanh Nguyen's idea of "narrative plentitude" to argue for opportunities to tell many different Asian American stories so that, in the future, a single movie no longer has to bear the burden of representation (Nguyen 2018; Ho 2018).

Activism Around Representation in Hollywood

In 2015, April Reign started the #OscarsSoWhite Twitter hashtag to point out the absence of Academy Award nominations for nonwhite lead or supporting actors (Reign 2018). Despite this call for greater diversity, at the next year's Academy Awards telecast, Chris Rock made three Asian American children the butt of a model minority joke on stage (Hess 2018). The Asian American Hollywood community quickly organized against the jokes, and the remainder of 2016 saw the flourishing of activism surrounding Asian American representation (Hess 2018). The list of prominent Asians and Asian Americans involved is extensive, including Constance Wu, Daniel Dae Kim, Kumail Nanjiani, Ming-Na Wen, Aziz Ansari, BD Wong, Margaret Cho, George Takei, Sandra Oh, director Ang Lee, and producer Janet Yang (Hess 2018). One of the main issues addressed was a lack of Asian American visibility in media, and a series of Twitter hashtags were made: #WhiteWashedOut, #StarringJohnCho, and #StarringConstanceWu (Hess 2018). The first one, created by Ellen Oh, protested "whitewashing," a term newly-associated with the casting of white actors in prominent roles which, for one reason or another, are deemed more appropriate for Asian actors[72] (Hess 2018). The latter two were the work of William Yu, who photoshopped John Cho and Constance Wu into movie posters to reimagine Asian Americans as the stars of popular films (Hess 2018).

As a result of the mass outcry, the year 2017 saw many of the Hollywood stars implicated in whitewashing practices—Scarlett Johansson, Matt Damon, Hank Azaria, and Ed Skrein—held accountable and publicly responding to the criticisms (T. G. Lee 2017). Though the first three's comments have skirted the issue, Skrein, as discussed in Chapter 2, gave up his role (T. G. Lee

[72] Whitewashing and its predecessor, yellow face, are discussed more extensively in Chapter 2.

2017; Couch 2017). This movement has been part of the general emergence of "watchdog groups" which identify and challenge examples of underrepresentation and stereotyping in popular media (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 197). Facing the threat of boycotts if their project is among the offending, producers have turned to blind-casting practices which create and cast roles without an explicit regard for race (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 197). While this mode of casting increases visible, onscreen diversity, by ignoring racially and ethnically specific topics, it fails to engage with marginalized experiences or to increase the diversity of the stories represented (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2018, 197). Thus, while activism around representation has produced some positive results, it has also exacerbated other issues. With regards to *Crazy Rich Asians* specifically, the activism created a beneficial production climate in which the film could be made. When Kevin Kwan was approached for adaptation rights in 2013, one producer had asked to make Rachel Chu white instead of Chinese American (Chris Lee 2018). However, by the time the film started production, anti-whitewashing movements had essentially guaranteed Rachel Chu's Chinese American identity (Kwan 2018).

Reception

The earliest fans of Kevin Kwan's novel were from New York's fashion industry, media industry, and upper east side, spreading quickly to young white women in their 20s and 30s (Chiu 2018; R. Chan and Yin 2018). Kwan postulates that Asian Americans, not a large segment of this mix, were initially suspicious of the book because of its racialized title (Chiu 2018). Only later did the film gain widespread support from Asian Americans (Chiu 2018). For the movie, Warner Bros. aimed to change this adoption pattern and "give the Asian American community ownership of the film" (Sun 2018b). Therefore, though the film maintained the broad appeal of a romantic

comedy, the marketing campaign was heavily targeted at the Asian American demographic (Sun 2018b; R. Chan and Yin 2018). Early screenings were held for Asian American artists and influencers, which turned many of these viewers into ambassadors for the film (Sun 2018b). In addition, the promotional strategies focused on tying the film to a greater purpose: making Hollywood value diverse storytelling (R. Chan and Yin 2018). By the time the film was released in North America, the Asian demographic, interested in the film and heavily invested in its success, drove 38% of first-weekend sales, despite being only 13% of the North American population (Sun 2018b). Overall, the $30 million budget film was commercially successful, grossing $174 million domestically and $238 million worldwide[73] (Sun 2018b; Box Office Mojo 2019). The top grossing countries or regions are listed in Table 4, below (Box Office Mojo 2019).

Table 4: Total Box Office Gross by Country

Country/Region	Total Gross (millions, rounded)
Domestic	$174.5
Australia	$17.4
United Kingdom	$7.4
Indonesia	$5.5
New Zealand	$2.3
Taiwan	$2.1
Hong Kong	$2.0
China	$1.7

Next to the United States (which had a gross box office revenue of $11.08 billion in 2019), China has the biggest film market worldwide ($9.15 billion) (Statista 2019a). Compared to the total potential market, the film fared poorly in China, making only $1.65 million total and disappointing the hopes of the film's production and distribution teams. One theory for China's low numbers is that, because the film was released in the country three months after it came out

[73] The film was also nominated for two Golden Globes and several other awards (Chu 2018).

in the rest of the world, many potential audience members had already seen the film either abroad or pirated online (Frater and Davis 2018). Nina Jacobson also postulates that the large discrepancy between the turnouts in the American and Chinese markets was caused by the different film landscapes. That is, in the United States, a big driver of audience attendance was a desire to see Asian and Asian American characters in Hollywood, but in China, the desire to see Chinese characters onscreen is already largely met by the country's domestic film industry (Gardner 2018). Overall, global responses to the film were a mix of praise for the depiction of Asian American experiences and criticism for the inaccurate or stereotyped portrayals of Singapore and its residents.[74]

Amid the successes of *Crazy Rich Asians* and Netflix's *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) (another Asian American romantic comedy that was released two days later), there was a slew of announcements for the development of broadcast-network shows featuring Asian American-specific stories[75] and leads, including Daniel Dae Kim's *Exhibit A*, Warren Hsu Leonard's

[74] American Cary Chow praises the film for how it handles "Asian American topics" like food, superstitions, Asian male emasculation, and dual cultural identity, while still dealing with universal themes (Chow 2018). Though American radio journalist Stephanie Foo recognizes the rich people entitlement and American entitlement in the film, she was still moved by its depiction of an Asian American experience that she can relate to (Foo 2018). She thinks a little entitlement is warranted for those who have struggled with their Asian American identities, a narrative which had been mostly invisible to mainstream Hollywood during her youth (Foo 2018). Her Singaporean aunt, however, criticizes the materialism of the movie (Foo 2018). Along those lines, Pakistani writer Fatima Bhutto critiques the film for its lack of South Asian representation and its capitalist fantasy of unbridled wealth during a time of rising inequality both in Singapore and worldwide (Bhutto 2018). Singaporeans Kirsten Han and Pooja Nansi also point out that *Crazy Rich Asians* fails to represent Singapore's diversity, relegating most of the cast members who are of non-East Asian descent to positions of servitude (Nansi 2018; Han 2018). Singaporeans Li Sian Goh and Ruby Thiagarajan add to these critiques, stating that the film exoticizes Singapore as an ultra-modern cosmopolitan city, erases indigenous and pre-colonial histories, and perpetuates systemic, colonialist racism that privileges the country's Chinese-majority population (Goh 2018; Thiagarajan 2018).

[75] The reason I call these stories "Asian American-specific" is because the settings or narratives have been explicitly tied to their characters' ethnicities, and the lead casts would almost certainly have to be Asian

Ohana, and Lisa Takeuchi Cullen's *Kung Fu* (Press 2019). While none of the previously listed dramas have made it to series, there are a few comedies that have either already been ordered or are still in the running: Jason Kim and Greta Lee's *KTown*, Jessica Gao's show currently nicknamed "Lazy Rich Asians," Hannah Simone's still untitled show, Kevin Kwan's *The Emperor of Malibu*, and Awkwafina's Comedy Central series (Press 2019). That comedy is the preferred genre is no surprise: as mentioned in Chapter 1, its broad appeal and relative inexpensiveness makes it both an ideal site for experimentation and a locale from which marginalized people and ideas can enter the mainstream (Press 2019).

Though the idea that these Asian American shows are experiments belittles both their creators and the growing list of existing Asian-led shows in America[76], they do seem to be arriving during a time of transition, not just for the networks, but also for the creators themselves. Cullen and Leonard, for example, have indicated that even just a few years ago, they would have been discouraged from or afraid to pitch such shows (Press 2019). Sue Naegle said that she would have been asked, "Who can we find to be in [*KTown*]? There's not a big star who is Korean that we could put at the center of it"[77] (Press 2019). The high-profiled *Crazy Rich Asians* has pooled together a mass of Asian talent which (in conjunction with the many Asian American stars not included) has made such questions unsustainable. Alongside other successful films like *Hidden*

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or Asian American, especially in the "race is visible" cultural climate. It is not to make the limiting assumption that all "Asian American" content must include ethnically specific markers.

[76] A Wikipedia article reveals that the number of Asian-led American television shows from the 2010s alone is already more than the combined count from the 1950s to 2000s ("American Television Series with Asian Leads" 2019).

[77] The lack of Asian talent was the same argument used to justify Jonathan Pryce's casting in *Miss Saigon* (Chapter 2).

Figures, *Get Out*, *Girls Trip*, and *Black Panther*, it proves that "culturally specific" [78] stories can appeal to wide audiences (Sun and Ford 2018).

3. Mainstream Romantic Comedy Conventions

Both *Flower Drum Song* and *Crazy Rich Asians* are mainstream romantic comedies[79], and they recycle many of the tropes within this conventional format. For example, they both include a dressing room scene in which the main character tries on several different outfits before an event. In *Flower Drum Song*, Linda Low gets ready for her date with Wang Ta in the musical number, "I Enjoy Being a Girl" (Film Still 1a). She is duplicated in a three-way mirror to show off her outfit options, and the sexualized display is used to emphasize her pride in her looks and figure. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, Rachel picks out an outfit for Colin and Araminta's wedding with the help of Oliver[80] (Film Still 1b). This montage is full of Oliver and Peik Lin's humorous one-liners ("This is why disco died") and antics from Mr. Goh. It continues the movie's voyeuristic show of wealth and high fashion, and in typical movie-makeover style, visibly transforms Rachel into someone who fits in with Nick's upper-class world. This illusion is shattered soon after the wedding, when Eleanor reveals Rachel's family history.

[78] As a caveat, labelling these films as "culturally specific" to mean "made by marginalized groups" reinforces the hegemonic notion that the dominant culture is the norm. The phrase association assumes that films about dominant groups are universal and not culturally specific to them, and the reverse for marginalized groups.

[79] Other recent Asian American romantic comedies include shows like *The Mindy Project* (2012-2017), *Selfie* (2014), and *Master of None* (2015-present), and films like *The Big Sick* (2017), *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), and *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) (Christina Lee 2018).

[80] Oliver serves as the "gay best friend" figure, a common trope within romantic comedies. He is played by the openly gay Nico Santos.

a  b 

Film Still 1: Dressing Room Scenes (Koster 1961; Chu 2018)

Film Studies professor Leger Grindon describes the differences between romantic comedies in the mainstream and margins with sets of opposing traits, reproduced in Table 5, below (Grindon 2012, 83).

Table 5: Mainstream and Marginal Traits in the Hollywood Romantic Comedy

	Mainstream	Margins
1	Glamour leads, stars – Grant, Roberts, Hanks, MacDowell	Common, odd-looking leads, not stars – Allen, Giamatti, July, Watson
2	Classical/intensified continuity style emphasizing natural instincts and desires driving romance	Self-conscious style – artifice, innovation, the unusual, emphasizing unnatural social manners governing romance
3	Courtship of unmarried, young couple, divorce resisted	Older couple, infidelity plot, culture of divorce, instability of romance
4	Obstacles externalized – represented as parents, rivals, class, age, careers, ethnic heritage, etc.	Obstacles internalized – represented as neurosis in couple, psychological emphasis
5	Romantic hopes and dreams endorsed	Realism deflates romantic sentiment/ ideals
6	"One true love," destined soulmate, "live happily ever after"	Circumstantial nature of romance, chance, uncertainty, limitations
7	Women seek economic security of marriage; men resist, guarding freedom	Men seek emotional stability in marriage; women resist, guarding freedom
8	Self-sacrifice for the beloved invests the union with redeeming grace, sparks transformation, prepares for parenting	Relationship serves as a means for self-exploration & the discovery of new identity, which leads to the separation of the couple
9	Divergent gender cultures overcome in unity of couple	Divergent gender cultures remain obstacle, tension over shifting gender roles continues
10	Sex between couple delayed until conclusion. Sex/final embrace marks union of couple	Sex plays conspicuous role in courtship-relationship, often source of tension or obstacle, expresses neurosis
11	Ending – couple united, happy	Ending uncertain, ambivalent, unresolved. Couple parts
12	"Screwball" cycle, "reaffirmation of romance" cycle	"Nervous romance" cycle, Shumway's "relationship" plot

Flower Drum Song falls into the "mainstream" category for all twelve traits listed above. Though *Crazy Rich Asians* mostly follows suit, it diverges from the mainstream for items 7 and 10 (women seeking economic security and delaying sex/embraces until the end of the film), which can be explained by the female-empowerment angle of *Crazy Rich Asians*. The writers and director have given Rachel the agency to decide whether to stay with Nick, and they turned the shallow Eleanor of the book into a respectable and self-sacrificing mother (Liao 2018). Unlike in *Flower Drum Song*'s era, which came before the second wave feminist movement, the idea that a woman can be economically independent and control her own sexuality has become mainstream.

Glamorous leads are the first listed sign of a mainstream romantic comedy (Table 5). In the two films, this convention pairs with the good looks of the cast members to underscore the attractiveness of the male lead characters. In *Flower Drum Song*, Wang Ta is pursued by three different women, even kissing two of them onscreen—Linda Low and Mei Li—a rarity for Hollywood portrayals of Asian men at the time[81] (Film Still 2a). In *Crazy Rich Asians*, there are several Asian men who are visibly loved and kissed by their partners, and whose shirtless, muscular bodies are put on display: Nick Young, Colin Khoo, and Michael Teo (Film Still 2b). The taken-for-granted handsomeness and congeniality of Wang Ta and Nick Young thus directly counter the stereotypes of the Asian man as emasculated, asexual, or threatening (Chapter 2).

[81] Wang Ta does reiterate the stereotype of the sexually shy Asian male in his encounter with the more experienced Linda Low. When explaining how he is a mix of Chinese and American, he says, "Sometimes the American half shocks the Oriental half. Sometimes my Oriental half keeps me from showing a girl what's on my mind" (Koster 1961). He only gains confidence when he kisses the even more naïve Mei Li.

This romantic comedy formula, in appealing to a wide range of audiences, moves these Asian males from the margins to the mainstream.

a  b 

Film Still 2: Attractive Male Leads (Koster 1961; Chu 2018)

The politics of these romantic comedies are not limited to their treatment of gender. Feminist critic Rowe suggests that romantic comedies tend to lean towards anti-authoritarianism and social transformation (Grindon 2012, 78). To identify the sources of authority and sites for social transformation within these two conventional films, one can look outside the films themselves. As discussed in Chapter 2, at the time of *Flower Drum Song*, anti-Asian immigration and naturalization restrictions were still in place. Coupled with Orientalized images in the media, Asians became the "other." Asian Americans, for their part, became lumped in with Asian Asians, creating the perpetual foreigner myth. This myth continues to persist today, as discussed in Chapter 2[82].

[82] As another example, in 2016, after China was mentioned several times during a presidential debate, Fox News sent Jesse Watters to New York's Chinatown to survey the residents' political opinions (Fox News 2016). The purpose of the visit, the blatant stereotyping in the clip, and the interviews of non-English speakers are evidence of an underlying and continuously renewed belief that Chinese Americans are both foreign and connected to China. In addition, Bill O'Reilly's comment post-clip that it "seemed like everybody was aware of what's going on" emerges from the stereotype that Chinatown is an insulated community which is not invested in American politics (Fox News 2016). Ronny Chieng, in addition to playing Eddie Cheng in *Crazy Rich Asians*, is also a senior media correspondent on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, and he criticized the clip a few days later (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah 2016).

By committing thoroughly to mainstream romantic comedy conventions then, these two films challenge the perpetual foreigner myth (anti-authoritarianism) and locate a place for Asian Americans within mainstream society (social transformation). As mentioned before, *Flower Drum Song* was created to entertain, not to make innovations to Broadway musical conventions. Similarly, Jon M. Chu has said that one of his goals in making *Crazy Rich Asians* was to show that "classic Hollywood movies could have starred Asians," and he sticks to the formulaic romantic comedy patterns (Tseng-Putterman 2018). In making each film's specific "Asian American story" legible to audiences, the creators have given up the chance to experiment with narratives and cinematic forms, or as Film Studies scholar Peter X Feng phrases it, comprehensibility comes at the cost of originality[83] (Feng 2017, 125–26). This conflict helps explain why the "minority viewpoints" of *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Crazy Rich Asians* are described with what are ostensibly contradictions: "specific but relatable" and "authentic but universal." That is, political efficacy and identity politics require that these stories are racialized in a way that would be legible to the audiences they want to reach (Feng 2017, 126). This legibility can be attained through cinematic conventions.

However, genres like the romantic comedy create ideological contradictions that are fundamentally irreconcilable, yet symbolically resolved through the narrative (Feng 2017, 125). In both *Flower Drum Song* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, the contradiction is found within the political assertion that Asian Americans are not perpetual foreigners. Such a claim can be proven through two options. Either Asian Americans are presented as the "same" as the hegemonic members of

[83] Recall Chapter 1, which mentioned that genre conventions and stereotypes are both used in media to quickly convey information to audiences.

American society, or they are presented as "more American" than others. Without many non-Asian characters in either film, both resort to the latter option. In effect, the "Other"—the "real foreigner"—then becomes increasingly Orientalized and foreignized by its comparison to the Asian American. In *Flower Drum Song*, these figures include Mei Li and the older generation of less-assimilated Asian Americans. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, Eleanor and Ah Ma (Shang Su Yi) most prominently play this role through the former's assertion that Rachel is too American, and the latter's place as the only main character who doesn't speak English[84]. This ideological contradiction between wanting to subvert the perpetual foreigner stereotype and wielding it against another is overlaid with the mainstream romantic comedy narrative. The cultural conflict becomes both a barrier to romantic relationships, driving the narrative forward, and a means to foreignize the "Other." Thus, when love overcomes those conflicts, it also symbolically resolves the contradictions. The next section will look more closely at how humor maps the ideological contradictions of resisting the perpetual foreigner stereotype onto language.

4. Accents and Languages

As noted in Chapter 2, generic and exaggerated "Asian" accents are frequently used to mark the "Asianness" of characters in American films and television. Classic examples include Mickey Rooney's Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Gedde Watanabe's Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles*, and Hank Azaria's Apu Nahasapeemapetilon from *The Simpsons* (Nath 2018). With such caricatures, the fake accent itself is intended to be funny, marking the characters as Oriental and inferior (a case of derisive ethnic humor). These stereotyped accents are symptoms

[84] In the novel, Shang Su Yi prefers to speak in Chinese and is fluent in Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, and Teochew, but she is also fluent in English (Kwan 2013, 176).

of the perpetual foreigner myth, which also produces the related assumption that Asian Americans speak Asian languages.

Accent and language-based mockery extends beyond the screen: Asian American journalist Helen Zia writes in her book, *Asian American Dreams*, that her childhood was filled with taunts composed of "a string of unintelligible gobbledygook that kids—and adults—would spew as they pretended to speak Chinese or some other Asian language," as well as seemingly innocuous "compliments" that she speaks "such good English" (as if English were not her native language) (Zia 2000, 110). These images and experiences can create racial insecurities around linguistic abilities in the Asian diaspora of "Western" countries like America, Britain, and Canada[85]. As "Asian" accents and languages have frequently been used to foreignize and denigrate the Asian diaspora, it is unsurprising that both *Flower Drum Song* with its assimilationist narrative and *Crazy Rich Asians* with its desire to distinguish between the Asian diaspora and Asian Asians use humor to subvert the idea that all Asians have Asian accents and are familiar with Asian languages.

As this analysis touches upon languages, dialects, and accents, the distinctions between these three terms must first be noted. A person typically cannot use one language (e.g. English, Greek, Hindi) to verbally communicate with a speaker of a different language (Yule [1985] 2010,

[85] For example, Asian Americans and Canadians have articulated that witnessing these fake "Asian" accents can elicit feelings of shame, even if they themselves have "American" and "Canadian" accents (Yim 2017). One study shows that young British Asians change their speech patterns in career-related conversations to reduce the "foreign features" in their speech, a phenomenon more broadly known as "code-switching" (Zara 2010; Thompson 2013). This insecurity is not limited to Asian diaspora: Latin Americans also face accent-related racial injury. In the 1990s, accent-elimination classes rose in popularity for New York immigrants who faced employment discrimination because of their accents (Hernandez 1993).

240–42). One language may have several dialects which vary in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, but they are usually mutually understandable (Yule [1985] 2010, 240–42). For example, English can be divided into British English, American English, South African English, and so on, and each of these dialects may have further subsets of dialects as well. However, Chinese dialects are somewhat atypical because many are mutually unintelligible. Accents, unlike dialects, just refer to variations on pronunciation and may be linked to a speaker's region, social class, and education (Yule [1985] 2010, 240–42). For example, radio producer and writer Stephanie Foo identifies "an uncle's more bougie, British-educated Malaysian accent" in the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (Foo 2018).

Flower Drum Song

In *Flower Drum Song* the movie, when Mei Li and her father, Dr. Li, first arrive in San Francisco Chinatown after smuggling themselves in on a boat, Mei Li asks a man on the street for help finding Sammy Fong's address, written on a piece of paper in what is presumably Chinese:

Mei Li: "Pardon me, venerable sir. Can you direct me to this address?"
Man: "Sorry, sister, I can't read Chinese."
Mei Li: *(To her father, surprised)* "He does not understand."

Film Still 3: Mei Li asks a man for directions (Koster 1961)

After a song number ("A Hundred Million Miracles"), a crowd gathers around Mei Li and her father, drawing the attention of a policeman. Mei Li then asks the policeman for help finding the address, and a similar interaction follows:

Mei Li: "Please, we are looking for someone."
Policeman: *(Looks at the note)* "I guess I should've taken lessons in Chinese." *(The crowd laughs.)* "Anybody here read this?"
Woman: "I think I can. It's the address of Sammy Fong. He's at the Celestial Gardens."

Film Still 4: Mei Li asks a policeman for help (Koster 1961)

These interactions set the tone for the rest of the movie. When Mei Li and Dr. Li walk through Chinatown, dressed in "Chinese" clothes and looking around curiously, they are immediately set apart from the rest of the inhabitants. These locals, all Asians in Western suits and dresses, stare as these two interlopers pass them on the street. The first man pictured in Film Still 3 (above) has an American accent which contrasts with Mei Li and Dr. Li's "Chinese" accents[86]. The difference in the formality of their vernacular (Mei Li's "venerable sir" and the

[86] Miyoshi Umeki (Mei Li) was raised in Japan, and Kam Tong (Dr. Li) was raised in California, U.S.A. In the film, Umeki spoke in what recorded appearances suggest was her natural voice (though even in those she may have been performing). Her singing in the film does overemphasize an "Asian" accent when compared to her normal singing voice (VideosTimes2 2015). Tong's accent was likely put on for the role.

man's "sister") further separates them. Both the man's inability to read Chinese and his American accent are set up to be unexpected: the first speakers in the movie are two Chinese dockworkers who use Mandarin Chinese, followed next by the accented Mei Li and Dr. Li. Combining this pattern with historical representations, this man's deviation from speaking either in Chinese or with a Chinese accent comes as a surprise. Mei Li's assumption that the man can read Chinese also aids in this bit of misdirection. When Mei Li tries again in Film Still 4, both the policeman and the woman who help them also have American accents, and aside from the woman, the rest of the crowd apparently doesn't read Chinese. Thus, the movie distinguishes between native-born/ assimilated[87] Asian Americans and recent Asian immigrants based on accent, language ability, and dress[88].

The crowd's laughter at the policeman's comment, "I guess I should've taken lessons in Chinese," signals that his dialogue is intended to be humorous. Because the policeman is noting his own inability to read Chinese, and the audience laughs along sympathetically, the humor can be categorized as empathetic. Based on Farber's framework then, the internalized constraint *[a]*, a feeling of others' superiority, is supplanted by *[b]*, the strong desire to belong. The *A*, or social norm, is the perpetual foreigner myth which assumes that these Chinatown residents would have the ability to read Chinese and, as already challenged in Film Still 3, that they would have Chinese accents. The *B*, then, is that neither of these assumptions prove true.

[87] In the book, everyone in the Wang family is born in China and has only been in the United States for about five years. However, in the movie all the "younger generation" characters (except for Mei Li) are native-born Asian Americans.

[88] The extreme difference in accent and speech between the immigrant and native-born generations is also used in earlier depictions of Asian characters. Notably, Charlie Chan's awkward English (as portrayed by a white actor) is completely at odds with his native-born children's fluent English.

Several potential readings of this set up emerge. One highlights a sense of community for native-born Asian Americans who might not be familiar with their heritage languages. In this reading, two potential sources supply feelings of inferiority which fuel element *[a]*. First, there may be a sense of incompetency for not knowing a language that others in the community know, and second, there is the racial insecurity which stems from Hollywood misrepresentation, discussed earlier. That an authority figure and most of the crowd also can't read Chinese, and that these characters are presented as highly assimilated Americans, provides momentary relief from this suppression. The policeman's assertion that he would have needed lessons in order to read the note furthers the idea that Asian culture is as foreign to native-born Asian Americans as it is to white America (however simplistic this dichotomy is). However, as Farber mentions, the *A* must remain in place for the humor to work. Therefore, within the movie, Mei Li and Dr. Li continue to evoke the foreigner figures which provide the incongruity necessary for the humorous moment. The potential for this interpretation to be subversive thus falls short.

In an alternative reading which further erodes the subversive potential of this bit, the humor absolves white America from its role in creating the perpetual foreigner myth. Mei Li, a newly arrived Chinese immigrant, is the one who mistakes the first man as someone who can read Chinese, displacing any shame at having made assumptions about the Chinatown residents onto her person. This degree of separation gives white audiences a license to laugh with the crowd, as they are not the butt of the joke. That Mei Li is a sympathetic character grants her forgiveness for this misstep[89], which can easily be ascribed to her unfamiliarity with her American

[89] This forgiveness might not have been so readily extended to a white person, if one had made the same mistake as Mei Li. Such a hypothetical scene could be interpreted as racially profiling the crowd, in which

surroundings. However, her mistake also legitimizes these assumptions in real life ("Even the Chinese don't realize that Chinese Americans are American"). Furthermore, Mei Li and her father rely on someone in the crowd knowing how to read Chinese. The crowd is asked by an authority figure, the policeman, to perform their "Chinese-ness." This demand is met by the woman, whose ability to read Chinese is first qualified by "I think." Thus, the crowd's assimilation is precariously negotiated: on the one hand, their laughter signals that they are too "American" to be literate in Chinese, but on the other hand, they must be able to read some Chinese for the story to proceed.

In the book, a very different accent-riddled interaction occurs when May Li and Old Man Li come to San Francisco. Here are the circumstances which bring the two to San Francisco: for fifteen years, Old Man Li has worked as a cook in China for a retired army general, General White, but to escape the Communists, the three of them move to Los Angeles (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 133). Three months later, General White dies, and Old Man Li and May Li move to San Francisco to seek Mr. Poon's help in setting up a restaurant (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 133, 136). The two are from Peking, China (Beijing), and they speak Mandarin, though May Li is also able to speak some Cantonese (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 133, 145). Their initial interactions with people in Chinatown have been in Cantonese (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 138, 145). Therefore, when they arrive at Mr. Poon's address, Old Man Li assumes that the residents also speak Cantonese:

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case the crowd's laughter could be read as ridiculing the white person's ignorance. Instead, the movie avoids overt commentary on racial hierarchies, and white people only appear twice. The first time, a white thief robs Master Wang Chi-Yang, and the second time, there are white spectators who watch the performances in Sammy Fong's Celestial Garden. Some scholars have interpreted the robbery as a punishment for Master Wang's resistance to "modernizing" and symbolic of white America forcing minorities into assimilation (as a consequence of the robbery, Master Wang finally moves the money he's been storing under his bed to the bank, as his ethnically-assimilated sister-in-law had been urging him to do) (Kim 2013, 16–19). This scene is taken almost directly from the original book (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 33–35).

> *After lunch the next day they went to Jackson Street to visit Mr. Poon. They rang the doorbell of the two-story house and a fat woman answered the door. "We have come to see Mr. Poon of Peking," Old Man Li said politely in Cantonese with a heavy Mandarin accent.*
>
> *"There is no Mr. Poon in this house," the fat woman said in Mandarin with a heavy Hunan accent* (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 146).

Unlike in the movie, this passage does not exoticize these two newcomers to America. Instead, this little bit of nonsense humor[90] reveals that Chinese immigrants do not all share one uniform spoken language. Instead, the specificity of the accents and dialects used in this interaction and throughout the book reveal the diversity of these immigrants and their difficulties in communicating with each other. Most of the communication challenges within the book are similarly made idiosyncratic to the people involved. Take, for example, the introductory description of Master Wang:

> *Wang Chi-yang was one of those who could not live anywhere else in the United States but in San Francisco Chinatown. He was from central China, speaking only Hunan dialect, which neither a Northerner nor a Cantonese can understand. His working knowledge of the English language was limited to two words: "yes" and "no." And he seldom used "no," for when people talked to him in English or Cantonese, he didn't want to antagonize them unnecessarily since he had no idea what they were talking about. For that reason, he wasn't too popular in Chinatown; his "yes" had in fact antagonized many people. Once at a banquet, his Cantonese host claimed modestly that the food was poor and tasteless and begged his honorable guest's pardon, a customary polite remark to be refuted by the guests, and Wang Chi-yang, ignorant of the Cantonese dialect, nodded his head and said "yes" twice* (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 3–4).

[90] In nonsense humor, the *[a]* is the rule of rational expression and the *[b]* is the freedom from those constraints. Here, the *A* element corresponding with rational expression is the norm that communicating with other human beings requires a shared language. In addition, Old Man Li switches to Cantonese from his native Mandarin for the purpose of facilitating his communication, setting up the expectation that the other conversant will know Cantonese. The *B* is that the two are somehow able to transfer information despite language mismatches and accents, as well as the thwarted expectation that the woman speaks Cantonese.

The ironic discrepancy between Master Wang's intentions and the outcomes of his decision to use "yes" is a direct result of his inability to understand Cantonese, not English. Thus, Master Wang's language barriers are immediately tied to his personal characterization instead of his status as a Chinese immigrant. Even when English becomes the language in question, the failure in communication is caused by Master Wang's individual quirks. His younger son, Wang San, usually speaks to his father in Chinese. The only time he uses English is when he is forced to recite his lessons in front of his father. Instead of reciting the requested geography and arithmetic material though, Wang San repeats the only thing he has successfully memorized: the American Declaration of Independence. He gets away with this deception in the presence of his father; however, his aunt Madam Tang has been taking citizenship classes and knows enough English that she could catch him cheating (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 40–41). Therefore, Master Wang is unable to understand his son, not because he is a "foreigner," but because of his own insistence that rote memorization is the only effective way to learn material.

Despite her studies in English, Madam Tang is not fluent in the language, leading to other language-based humor. First, she misreads a joke in an English-language newspaper. The joke is that a Chinese café manager's inability to understand English thwarts a bandit's attempted stickup, and instead of stealing money, the frustrated bandit ends up paying 85 cents for his meal. She interprets the joke as a real crime, twisting the story such that the bandit steals 85 cents from the manager, but the rest of his money is safe because it is kept in the bank (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 12). In her citizenship classes too, she misstates that a privilege of being an American citizen is being able to find a "joke" in the government, accidentally replacing the intended word, "job" (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 30).

Although these humorous set ups do mock Madam Tang's grasp of the English language, they serve a larger purpose than to point out her mistakes. The newspaper cutout itself is a derisive caricature of the Chinese immigrant's English. However, in both the article and Madam Tang's mirrored actions, the Chinese manager and Madam Tang wield their misunderstandings to their own advantage: the manager receives his payment, and Madam Tang has another argument for why Master Wang should store his money in the bank. The lack of English proficiency is thus able to empower the immigrant, reversing the assumption that it is an insurmountable barrier to American life[91]. Madam Tang's second mistake, replacing the word "job" with "joke," is unintentionally reflective: it juxtaposes the seriousness with which she takes her citizenship classes with the cavalier attitude that natural-born American citizens can afford to have towards their government and citizenship status.

In addition, language mistakes are not unidirectional (where only English words are messed up). In the book, Wang Ta's friend, Chang Ling-yu, marries a girl from Mexico who is learning Chinese and misspeaks just like Madam Tang. When Dolores wants to tell Chang she loves him, she incorrectly says, "*Wo ai chi,"* which roughly translates to "*I am gluttonous*" (C. Y. Lee [1957] 2002, 195). Thus, Lee reminds his audience that language mistakes are tied to the adoption of any language, supplanting the typical English language vs "foreigner" opposition.

In the film, this variety of layered linguistic humor is lost. Perhaps to increase legibility, all the major characters in the Broadway musical and movie adaptation speak English. Therefore, the inter-dialect humor, Wang San's lesson recitations, and Madam Tang's newspaper

[91] It is also not clear in the novel whether the Chinese manager and Madam Tang are unintentionally or purposefully misunderstanding their situations.

interpretation no longer make narrative sense. In their place are rudimentary misunderstandings of American slang and more word replacement errors. A representative example follows.

Wang Ta: "Did you sleep well, my father?"
M. Wang: "Yes. Thank you, my son."
Wang Ta: "Good. I need some money."
M. Wang: "Money. That is nothing unusual. How much this time?"
Wang Ta: "Twenty-five bucks."
M. Wang: "Bucks?"
M. Liang: "Dollars."
(Wang San enters. More dialogue.)
M. Wang: "Now, what do you need those 25 dollars for?"
Wang San: "He probably got himself a new tomato."
M. Wang: "Tomato? For 25 dollars you could fill this room with tomatoes."
(More dialogue. Wang Ta exits.)
Wang San: "So long, Pop. Don't take any wooden chopsticks[92]."
M. Wang: "You! You go right back and finish your breakfast." *(To Madame Liang)* "What language is he using? I have a feeling he has been disrespectful, but I am not sure."
M. Liang: "No, no, that is American-style slang."
M. Wang: "And I suppose it's American-style too, when a boy can do anything without his father's consent."
M. Liang: "Yes, but this is the USA. In my citizenship class, I have learned, 'We, the people of the United States, are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happy times.'"

Film Still 5: Wang San uses American slang (Koster 1961)

[92] An ethnically-marked modification of the American adage, "Don't take any wooden nickels."

Because Master Wang is unfamiliar with his sons' vernacular ("bucks," "tomatoes," "wooden chopsticks"), Madame Liang acts as a mediator between him and his children. Robert G. Lee identifies her as the pro-ethnic assimilation character, an idea reinforced with the song "Chop Suey" which is performed after Madame Liang obtains her citizenship later in the film[93] (R. G. Lee 1999, 178). Scholar Chang-Hee Kim adds that the African American racial identity of actress Juanita Hall (who plays Madame Liang) gives Madame Liang additional authority to teach the more "foreign" Asians how to assimilate (Kim 2013, 34). Ultimately, though, Madame Liang herself must continue to perform her "outsider" status, as revealed by her misquoting the Declaration of Independence ("the pursuit of happy times").

The trite linguistic fractures throughout the film emphasize a gap between the immigrant and native-born Chinese Americans. This gap exists on two dimensions. One is cultural: the difference between modern America and a traditional, Orientalized China, as highlighted by the visual contrast between Wang San's baseball outfit and Master Wang's silk shirt (Film Still 5). The other is generational, as promoted by the song, "The Other Generation," which follows shortly after the above scene. The song is sung first by the adults and then by the children, each bemoaning their inability to get through to the other generation. Interestingly, it ignores the intersection between culture and generation, focusing only on generic generational differences[94]. The artificial division between culture and generation is further encouraged when Madame Liang sides with Master Wang in the song: she commiserates with him along the lines of their shared

[93] As Lee discusses, the song celebrates the absorption of Chinese ethnic differences into America's multicultural melting pot, ignoring the racialized history and roots of Chinese Americans to focus on the more easily managed cultural markers (R. G. Lee 1999, 175)

[94] For example, both sides sing, "How will we ever communicate without communication?"

generation, whereas in other circumstances she stands against him to advocate for adopting American ways.

This divide has implications for potential readings of the humor in the scene. Master Wang's tomato line and his query as to whether Wang San is being disrespectful could be interpreted using the superiority theory of humor, in that it puts down his English abilities and highlights his outsider status. However, because "The Other Generation" song almost exclusively attributes the slang's illegibility to the generational gap (despite Madame Liang calling the slang "American-style"), the misattribution theory of humor may also apply. That is, the ability to read Master Wang as an out-of-touch adult allows audience members to laugh at or with him because they can attribute their laughter to the innocuous generational gap. Subconsciously, this attribution frees them to also laugh at the Orientalized depiction of Master Wang, an impulse they may be blocked from outwardly accepting because the exclusionist laughter at his unassimilable "foreigner" status runs counter to the Cold War liberalist rhetoric of ethnic assimilation.

In summary, by comparing how the book and movie version of *Flower Drum Song* handle language, it becomes clear that the movie has homogenized the complex ways in which the book's Chinatown characters communicate with each other. A stereotyped divide forms between the immigrant and native-born Chinese Americans. As English is the privileged language in the film, all linguistic errors and misunderstandings are unilaterally made by the Chinese immigrants (Madame Liang, Master Wang, Mei Li, and Dr. Li), with the exception of the native-born Chinese Americans' inability to read Chinese (Film Still 3, Film Still 4). Yet even this inability is normalized by the laughing crowd's alignment with the policeman, and the misunderstanding once again

becomes Mei Li's. As a result, the native-born, hyper-assimilated Chinese Americans' way of speaking emerges as "correct" in the movie[95]. Overall, the movie version of *Flower Drum Song* uses the accents and language of the "modern" and "Americanized" native-born to partially subvert the perpetual foreigner myth and promote Chinese Americans as evidence of successful ethnic assimilation (contributing to the formation of the model minority myth, as argued by Robert G. Lee (R. G. Lee 1999, 172)). However, in doing so, it intensifies the foreignness of Chinese immigrants, and requires that these "outsiders" change their language and ways in order to become more American.

Crazy Rich Asians

When Peik Lin's father, Wye Mun Goh, is first introduced, he speaks haltingly to Rachel in what the closed captions call a "thick accent." After he and Rachel exchange a few pleasantries, Mr. Goh reveals that he instead has a "normal accent":

> **Mr. Goh:** *(In thick accent)* "Uh, uh, uh, Rachel Chu, we are so, uh, grateful for all the help you have given my, uh, Peik Lin back in her uni days. I mean, without you, uh, she would be a hot mess."
>
> **Rachel:** **"**Oh my god, no. Actually, if it wasn't for her, I'd be a big mess. She was a huge help to me in college. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Goh."
>
> **Mr. Goh:** "Nice to meet you, too, Chu. Ku-ku. Ku-Chu. You. Poo-poo." *(Laughs.) (In normal accent)* "No, I'm just kidding. I don't have an accent. I'm just messing with you. No, no, I studied in the States, too. Yeah, Cal State Fullerton. I majored in Thought."
>
> **Rachel:** *(Unamused)* "Mmm."

[95] As a caveat to this analysis, Wang San's exaggerated overuse of "American slang" is recognized as nonstandard when Wang Ta tells Mei Li to avoid learning English from his little brother.

Film Still 6: Wye Mun Goh's fake accent (Chu 2018)

Mr. Goh's antics are apparently typical for his character, as none of his family members question his change in voice. Instead, Mrs. Goh giggles at her husband (Film Still 6d), and Peik Lin shakes her head in exasperation (Film Still 6e). Their signals and Mr. Goh's "just kidding" comment create the comic context in which this joke can be analyzed. Using Farber's framework, this scene can be interpreted as employing a mix of derisive and nonsense humor, where the internal state *[a]* is both a sense of other's superiority and the normative use of language, and the *[b]* state is a personal need for superiority and freedom from the constraints of rational communication. The *A* and *B* elements shift throughout the miniature comedic plot.

Initially, the *A* element is the standard of high language fluency that is established by every character in the film who precedes Mr. Goh's appearance. Whether they are speaking in

English, Cantonese, Mandarin, French, Malay, or Hokkien, these characters are comfortable[96] with the languages they use, and many are multilingual[97]. They also have consistent and natural-sounding accents which are regionally and personally distinctive, whether or not audience members have the context to "place" the accents. By contrast, pre-reveal-Mr. Goh's hesitant, "uh"-studded speech and inconsistent, generic "accent" stand out. His discomfort with English counters the superior language skills of the rest of the characters. However, he stops short of fully developing into the typical *B* element (a derisive caricature of an accented Asian) because Rachel's response rejects hearing his voice as humorous. She returns his dialogue with a smiling face and cheerful tone without altering her own speech patterns[98] (Film Still 6a). Mr. Goh's accent thus passes without comment and is briefly normalized.

As his words devolve into nonsensical rhymes of Rachel's last name (Film Still 6b), the comedic plot becomes suspended in anticipation. Though his rhymes could potentially be read as words in some unknown language, the audience is alerted to the approach of the incongruous

[96] By "comfortable," I mean confident and competent in the language. I do not mean "unaccented," as that word lacks meaning in this film's transnational context.

[97] Kwame Anthony Appiah summarizes the complex politics of language in Singapore (Appiah 2018). To stabilize its ethnically heterogenous society, the country institutionalized four racial categories after its 1965 independence: Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Other. All citizens were to learn two languages in school. One was English, and the other was Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil, based on a citizen's race. However, this attempt to recognize identities also oversimplified and rigidified ethnolinguistic realities. About half of the Indians were not Tamil, and Mandarin was not the heritage dialect of most of the Chinese Singaporeans (40% spoke Hokkien, the Min dialect, and only 2% spoke Mandarin). In 1979, the "Speak Mandarin" campaign prohibited non-Mandarin Chinese dialects in both broadcasts and schools, cutting many of the older inhabitants off from both society and their descendants (Appiah 2018; Johnson 2017). After the 2015 death of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, the main driver behind these policies, there has been a revived interest in cultural roots and ancestral languages (Johnson 2017). In the *Crazy Rich Asians* movie, however, Mandarin remains privileged over Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay, and Singlish (Chou 2018).

[98] Sometimes people may acknowledge accents that differ from theirs by slowing down their speech (implying impaired communication) or by imitating the accent (sometimes mockingly).

B element by Rachel's baffled face and Mrs. Goh's snickers (Film Still 6c and Film Still 6d, respectively). In addition, other parts of the film use subtitles to translate important dialogue, and their absence in this scene indicates that Mr. Goh's words are not meant to be understood. Once he reveals his farce, the comedic plot is resolved as a lame and out-of-touch "dad" joke that fails to amuse Peik Lin and Rachel (Film Still 6e and Film Still 6f).

Mr. Goh's pretense is a clear parody of the generic "ching-chong" Asian accent that so commonly plagues Asian representations in Hollywood. His act evokes two other ways in which Asians are commonly ridiculed: the use of "gobbledygook" as an approximation for Asian languages and the mockery of Asian names[99]. Another *A*-*B* pairing has therefore developed by the end of this scene. Mr. Goh's broken English (previously the half-formed *B* element) has turned into the expected *A*. This *A* element can be viewed expansively as the ways in which accent, language, and names are used to jokingly denigrate Asians, drawing inspiration from outside the movie's world and potentially evoking a sense of inferiority in viewers who have experienced language and accent-related shame (the internal state *[a]*). Then, the *A* is disrupted by the reveal of Mr. Goh's natural, American accent (the new *B* element). The target of this humor becomes the caricature itself, elevating a personal sense of triumph and superiority (the internal state *[b]*) over the stereotyped representations.

[99] The first type of mockery is described by Helen Zia, mentioned at the beginning of this section (Zia 2000, 110). The second is evidenced by the fake crew names (e.g. "Captain Sum Ting Wong") reported by KTVU after the crash of Asiana Airlines Flight 214 in 2013 (Trinidad 2013).

Director Jon M. Chu and Ken Jeong aimed to misdirect the audience with Mr. Goh's accent so that viewers would either recognize the stereotype at play[100] or question their personal assumptions about how Asians speak (Nath 2018; Flint 2018). Despite their intentions, some interpretations of this humor suggest that it is not victimless. By once again making an Asian accent the butt of a joke (even if subversively), the humor can reinforce the idea that having an Asian accent is undesirable. Mr. Goh's assertion that he "[doesn't] have an accent" also privileges the American accent as the norm and marginalizes individuals with Asian accents, including his own wife (though her laughter licenses his joke). In the Singaporean context of the movie, this choice becomes especially meaningful. In the nation's "Speak Good English Movement" (2000), linguist Ying Ying Tan identifies the institutionalization of the idea that Singaporeans do not speak English well, despite the fact that a majority of Singaporeans use English as their main language (Tan 2018). This national narrative has created linguistic insecurity in some young Singaporeans who have responded by adopting pseudo-foreign accents in an effort to conform to the "superior" standards of American or British English (Tan 2018). They are exposed to these other accents through the radio, internet, cable television, streaming services, and movies (Tan 2018).

In his review article of the movie, Mark Tseng-Putterman goes so far as to interpret the fake-accent scene as symptomatic of the film's respectability politics that aligns it with the dominant social values of mainstream America instead of challenging them (Tseng-Putterman 2018). That is, the film reassures viewers that this Asian—rich, educated, and "unaccented"—is the acceptable kind instead of questioning the underlying notions of acceptability. His argument

[100] Encouraging recognition of the stereotype is an especially effective strategy for audience members familiar with Ken Jeong's natural voice or his earlier performances in *The Hangover* trilogy as the accented Leslie Chow.

raises significant points about the film in general, since respectability politics *is* one way in which the romantic comedy is used to mainstream Asian Americans. However, it doesn't apply as well to Mr. Goh's accent joke.

Mr. Goh figures as a cringe-inducing but caring dad. In this role, he makes several humorous but uncomfortable faux pas. He comments on Rachel's appearance, targets K-pop stars' weights, and pushes for Rachel to wear an inappropriate dress he picked out. By the end of the film, she has had enough, and she pushes him away from her at the engagement party, somewhat jokingly. Mr. Goh, a Gatsby-like nouveau riche figure, is far from the "acceptable" Asian that Tseng-Putterman suggests, yet he is also not a villain. Instead, his redeeming qualities emerge when the heartbroken Rachel takes refuge in his home after she learns about her father. In her sensitive moments, his joking subsides, and he and the rest of the Goh family tenderly take care of her. In Mr. Goh, at least, the film's goals to create whole human beings has been met.

In the novel, there is no fake accent scene. Instead, much of the linguistic humor within the film is found in the footnotes. As mentioned before, the book was targeted towards North American audiences, and the footnotes are no exception. This directionality is exemplified by the many explanations of cultures, histories, and Malay, Hokkien, and Cantonese terms to readers presumably unfamiliar with them[101]. For example, Kwan uses British equivalencies to explain Malaysian honorific titles, revealing his assumption that British culture is more familiar than Malaysian to North American audiences (Kwan 2013, 22, 93). The linguistic humor, then, is primarily based on translating curse words from Malay/Hokkien/Cantonese into English, a clear

[101] Kwan revealed that the footnotes were initially written to just be informative (Kwan 2018). However, his editor recommended that he make them more entertaining, and he rewrote them in the voice of Nick's gossipy cousin, Oliver T'sien.

case of counter-restriction humor, which subverts the norms of using inoffensive language. However, he does not provide a similar translation when his character Oliver speaks in French ("*Chez toi ou chez moi?*") (Kwan 2013, 202). Again, the underlying presumption is that his audience does not need help understanding European languages, but it does for Asian languages.

Generally, the novel version of *Crazy Rich Asians* embraces its own touristic exoticization of Asia. Framed as a satire of the extreme elite of Singapore, it largely keeps the audience at an emotional arms-distance from its caricatured figures. Comparatively, the film version is more conscious to avoid stereotype and stigmatic representations. As a result, it has softened much of the satire in the novel and made its main characters more well-rounded and likeable. The director and cast members of the film version have even tried to use humor to engage with and dismantle stereotypes such as the "ching-chong" accent. However, these efforts are only partially successful and reveal that the film, like the novel, fundamentally privileges American audiences.

5. Conclusion

Both the 1961 *Flower Drum Song* and the 2018 *Crazy Rich Asians* romantic comedy adaptations seek to dismantle the perpetual foreigner myth, the former as a part of assimilation narratives and the latter as an assertion of Asian American identity. However, the outcomes of their efforts are different. In the Cold War period before the Asian American movement started and the term "model minority" was coined, it seems likely that Rodgers and Hammerstein would have been more concerned about avoiding stereotyping Asian Americans as threatening hordes than as assimilable minorities. The *Flower Drum Song* musical and film took the accents and languages of the characters in the novel and heightened them into divisive stereotypes between

the native-born Asian Americans and the immigrant Asian Americans. Thus, the native-born Asian Americans indeed became assimilated while the immigrant Asian Americans were foreignized.

For *Crazy Rich Asians*, the Twitter movements against whitewashing and the push for diversity on broadcast, cable, and streaming networks have made cultural specificity an important platform for the film's creators. Therefore, in adapting the book, the *Crazy Rich Asians* film removed stereotyping humor (such as Rachel's comment that she doesn't date Asian men) and added its own subversive social commentary on stereotypes through Mr. Goh's accent joke. While the downsides of Mr. Goh's joke by themselves are of minor concern[102], the Americentric perspective of the film which it reveals helps create an understanding of how a film which touts diversity and authenticity can end up reinforcing other dehumanizing stereotypes.

The example of the Gurkha guards who protect Shang Su Yi's estate are indicative of the film creators' blind spots towards characters of non-East Asian descent (apart from Nico Santos and Henry Golding). The single Gurkha guard mentioned in the book has perfect Queen's English, smiles, and treats Rachel with politeness and friendliness (Kwan 2013, 157). The Gurkhas as a group are described with awe as "the deadliest soldiers in the world"[103] (Kwan 2013, 157). In the movie, however, the two turbaned guards are treated as unreadable menaces, and they circle the car in the dark while ominous music plays in the background. When one speaks, it is indiscernibly into a walkie talkie, until he says, "Yah yah!" to let Peik Lin know she can drive through the gate. That the film creators would make this shift is odd in itself. Perhaps they were forecasting troubled times ahead for Rachel, or perhaps they were emphasizing the jungle-like

[102] Most reviewers, if they were critical, focused instead on their difficulties with suspending their belief that Wye Mun Goh's brief attendance at a U.S. university would erase his accent (Thiagarajan 2018).
[103] Granted, this statement is somewhat exoticizing.

surroundings to make the subsequent appearance of an immensely wealthy estate even more jarring. However, that no one in the cast or crew noticed and spoke up about the dehumanization of these brown bodies (or did and were ignored) is even stranger, especially since the cast had been involved as on-set cultural advisors and had advocated for other changes (such as Constance Wu, who was also in this scene). The same Orientalizing portrayals that many Asian American activists have been advocating against have thus reappeared in *Crazy Rich Asians*.

The privileges of the majority figures and lack of intersectionality in this instance speak volumes about the importance of diversity of experience, not just census diversity, for drawing attention to issues which may otherwise be overlooked. This moment, in addition to the other criticisms launched against *Crazy Rich Asians*, brings up the question of how much should be asked of the creative talents who play a part in these Hollywood films. On the one hand, *Crazy Rich Asians* faced a heightened level of scrutiny compared to many other white-led romantic comedies. On the other, they themselves labeled the film as a movement for diversity. The idea that no one film can represent everyone, a common defense for *Crazy Rich Asians*, is certainly true. However, in the Gurkha soldiers' case, it wasn't a lack of representation that was the issue. It was that the soldiers were incomplete and stereotyped figures used for laughs—the very same situation that marginalized activists and watchdog groups have been protesting. Thus, when marginalized creatives use comedy to appeal to broad audiences, they may humanize through empathetic humor, challenge subordination through subversive humor, or reinforce problematic representations through derisive humor or the inherent contradictions in humor. As they slowly enter and merge with the mainstream, they can change dominant discourses and power structures, but they can also perpetuate them.

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Biography

Karena Yu is a senior in the Biomedical Engineering and Plan II Honors programs, with a certificate in business foundations. She was born in Houston, Texas and raised in The Woodlands, Texas. During her time at the university, she has enjoyed her involvement in several clubs and activities. She has been most shaped by her roles as a codirector for the 2017 Fall Engineering EXPO and as an AEMB Biomedical Engineering peer advisor. After graduation, Karena will be leaving her Texas roots to join the IT Emerging Talent Rotational Program with Merck & Co., Inc. somewhere on the east coast.